

ARTS

ART OF THE CITY

An occasional series about San Diego's diverse artistic community



LILE KVANTALIANI PHOTOS

Contemporary artist Taylor Chapin, who was born and raised in Encinitas, with one of her art pieces on the wall.

Consumerism and consciousness

Local painter **Taylor Chapin** examines the blurred lines between art and advertisement in a solo exhibition

BY SETH COMBS

For as long as there has been recorded history, there has been advertising. And yes — without getting into the history, nuances and varying viewpoints on what, exactly, constitutes advertising — it is still, in essence, a rich and fundamental practice, designed intricately and expertly to activate our most basic human desires and fears. Is that not, at its core, an art form?

For Taylor Chapin, questions like the one above persist. Speaking with her in her Oceanside home and studio, which she shares with her fiancé and two cats, I can't help but wonder where her fascination with advertising and commercial consumerism first began. For Chapin, however, the answer is never that simple.

"I'd always been fascinated with advertising and pop art, so I thought between that and my general meticulous way of doing things, it lent itself to this examination of the more advertising aspects," says Chapin. "I've always been interested in having a sense of humor around my work and not taking it too seriously."

However humorously intended, Chapin is creating works that do ask the viewer to seriously consider our relationships with consumerism. She deftly explores these issues within "Tell Me About Yourself," her recently opened solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Diego/North.

In the Encinitas space, Chapin displays what seems to be a seamless blend of figurativism, pop art and even op art (short for optical art), but these works are adroitly planned and executed. Exquisitely rendered, the paintings often take multiple days to complete, with Chapin using patterned layering to create an illusory, almost hypnotic effect.

"It's very intentional mixed with some happy accidents," says Chapin, who often shoots photographs with models before using that image as the template for the oil painting. "I do have set references. I wish I had more of an imagination, but I need to plan and know exactly what I want to do beforehand before I make it."

One could argue that Chapin's work is part of a larger artistic movement that attempts to examine consumerism and commodification.

Beginning with pop art and perfected in its myriad hybrid movements, and most recently discussed within systems such as AI-generated artwork and even works to be sold as non-fungible tokens (NFTs), this type of work isn't novel. Still, Chapin is just old enough to remember a time without the Internet and, more pressing, a time where it wasn't used to data-scrape our identities in order to advertise to us.

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A painting in Chapin's "Tell Me About Yourself" exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Diego/North.

Taylor Chapin

Age: 31 Born: Encinitas

Fun fact: Chapin says one of her earliest inspirations, and one she credits for her intricate style, was attempting to trace the designs of Lisa Frank, the company behind the hyper-colored designs on school supplies that were ubiquitous in the 1980s and beyond.

'Taylor Chapin: Tell Me About Yourself'

When: Noon to 5 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays, through Dec. 30. Engagement Guide presentation at noon Oct. 15; celebration of Taylor Chapin and Danielle Dean from 4 to 8 p.m. Oct. 21

Where: Institute of Contemporary Art San Diego/North, 1550 S. El Camino Real, Encinitas

Admission: Pay as you wish

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dawn of social media, the rise of influencer culture and how it has fundamentally rejiggered the entire marketing landscape.

"I think subjects like that have always been in my consciousness when it comes to my art, but it has begun to get more on the forefront of the work as I've continued to be more deliberate in what I'm creating," Chapin says. "Being on the border of these changing times, there is a nostalgia as well that I can't separate from the work."

While the newer works at ICA are decidedly of her style, one distinct difference is Chapin's examination of tangible objects. In newer pieces such as "Irresistible Curves" and "Seductive Swells," there is a vessel or vase that's being held or embraced by the figure in the painting. The paintings are even more pronounced in their assessment of how accumulation shapes our identity, and how our lives are influenced by our consumerist tendencies. That is, by having the figure embracing this object, almost sensually, Chapin is showing the viewer that as much as we'd love to think that wealth and accumulation don't define who we are as people, they are often the most important relationship we have.

"I think about that a lot, and there's so much emotion in it as well; how we love that pair of shoes the most and how that couch we bought is so important," Chapin says. "But the couch doesn't give a (expletive) about you. It's a one-way relationship. But it's in our nature to put this energy and emotion into loving certain brands and objects. It's never-ending, and it's an emotionally driven relationship that companies are benefiting from."

"None of it has value without us wanting it," Chapin continues. "It's activated by the participant, the consumer. So it's the idea of blurring the line of the vessel and the body, and how they're often codependent on one another. It just felt very prescient for the time we live in."

Born and raised in Encinitas, Chapin says she wasn't initially interested in visual art outside of occasionally doodling in class at San Dieguito Academy High School. It wasn't until she went to MiraCosta College, where she took a life drawing class, that Chapin says she really decided to take the practice seriously. She later transferred to the San Francisco Art Institute to major in fine arts with an emphasis on painting.

"I've always done art as a hobby as opposed to something I could take more seriously," says Chapin, who came back to San Diego to attend the University of California San Diego to earn her master's degree in visual art. "It's always been a part of my life, but I didn't realize I could do it as a career until I got older. I tried more Type-A stuff and failed miserably."

She began delving more into the "conceptual" side of commercialism and advertising within her work at SFIA, crafting large-scale works of grocery stores and shelves. Once she was at UC San Diego, she spent a lot of her time researching the history and interconnectedness of visual patterns, and began to develop the style she's known for today.

"I wanted to draw the viewer in and in different ways, because it isn't just one thing that I want them to get from it," says Chapin, who has also had solo exhibitions of her work at Quint ONE, the Oceanside Museum of Art and Hill Street Country Club. "It could be just a really weird painting. It could also be a piece about social media stalking you. Or something in between."

It is that in-betweenness that makes Chapin one of the most promising artists in San Diego. And while her work isn't wholly conceptual in nature, Chapin does hope that viewers will walk away from "Tell Me About Yourself" with a sense of a message or, at the least, that they'll begin to examine how consumerism and advertising shapes their own identity.

"For most of us, in order to survive, we have to participate in this system," says Chapin, who will discuss her work at an "Engagement Guide" event at ICA on Oct. 15. "I'm not better than anyone else and I don't necessarily do things differently. The critique I'm making is also something I'm participating in. All I can ask for is to have a conversation about it. To participate in an awareness of it."

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