

Cade Tompkins Projects  
198 Hope Street Providence Rhode Island 02906  
www.cadetompkins.com cadetompkins@mac.com  
Telephone 401 751 4888

# PRINT-INTERESTING

## An Abridged Conversation with Serena Perrone

Posted by Deborah Krieger on September 27, 2013



While I love having the opportunity to reach out to artists and curators via email and pick their brains, I must say I prefer the spontaneity and camaraderie of an in-person interview. Ideas flow, change course, and I have the opportunity to really fully engage with my subject. Such was the case with this in-person interview with artist Serena Perrone where we discuss her life and work.

In person, the artist is petite, warm, and loquacious, with thoughtful blue-gray eyes that reveal a sharp mind and true depth of character. Her ideas and words flowed in a wonderfully intellectual yet accessible way. She did not prepare responses to any of these questions, and was able to tell me what I wanted to know off-the-cuff. Enjoy!

Cade Tompkins Projects  
198 Hope Street Providence Rhode Island 02906  
www.cadetompkins.com cadetompkins@mac.com  
Telephone 401 751 4888

**Deborah Krieger: So, for my first question, how did you come to exhibit at the List Gallery this year?**

**Serena Perrone:** I was invited by Andrea Packard [Swarthmore Class of 1985]. We got to know each other a few years ago through another artist, Daniel Heyman, who introduced us, and I came and saw his exhibition... it just seemed like there was an affinity between Andrea's curatorial style and some of the work I was making at the time, and so we just slowly got to know each other, and she did a studio visit awhile back... and she decided that she thought I would be a good fit for the List Gallery. And then she was able to propose this exhibition as part of the Cooper Series and fortunately we were able to get some funding from the Cooper Foundation as well, so that was an added bonus to... help us along with the exhibition and the catalogue.

**DK: So when did [your exhibition and funding] get finalized?**

**SP:** Earlier in 2013...and that was really, really wonderful because it gave us time to plan the catalogue and get everything photographed and gave Andrea time to write the curatorial essay, all those things... so we've been working on this exhibition for over a year, I would say... regardless of whether or not we had funding...so that was the added bonus.

**DK: Like doing research...**

**SP:** Yeah, doing research, discussing themes and ideas in the work, and really looking at all of the work: trying to decide which pieces to show together, what orientation, how to create a flow and cohesion within one exhibition that spans many years of studio process.

**DK: ...The work you exhibited is not new, right?**

**SP:** Some of it is very new; the long panorama that spans the curved wall...

**DK: You created that for this exhibit?**

**SP:** Not for this exhibit, but that is my most recent work; it was completed last year in 2012. And that was sort of a companion piece to the previous piece that was made in 2010 that is displayed partially in those vitrines in the Gallery.

**DK: In the second room?**

**SP:** In the second room. So that was from 2010. And the rest of the work is from, I'd say, 2009 back through 2005, 2006. And so you're getting... a wide range of work, but within that work, it was chosen because a lot of the themes were... coming back around, whether some of the visual motifs were shared across some of the different bodies of work, or some of the themes themselves were consistent, but also leading to new work through variation and through

Cade Tompkins Projects  
198 Hope Street Providence Rhode Island 02906  
www.cadetompkins.com cadetompkins@mac.com  
Telephone 401 751 4888

visiting... we thought that these particular bodies of work shared enough in common that they could... give viewers a nice overview of my recent years in the studio.

**DK: It's interesting you mentioned that, because I noticed there's a pretty strong contrast between the Asian-style mountain landscapes and the more pictorial storytelling works, so I'm wondering how did you connect those two thematically or visually?**

**SP:** Well, I think that, thematically and visually, there's a pervasive sense of narrative and the element of time. So the passage of time, and... the interplay between the foreground and the distant background compositionally, and also, the use of two different mediums, and two different languages, describe things that are in extreme proximity and things that are in extreme distance... the language and the... process of creating these landscapes is sort of similar in that respect. And a lot of the themes... my work is derived from personal narrative and stories that I...go back to time and time again, but what happens is that I am able to obtain...a multivalent view of some of these personal narratives as time progresses, as I make work about them... sometimes the meanings of those events change to me, my memory of those events changes, their relevance to my present life changes...

**DK: What kind of events do you mean? Like a childhood memory?**

**SP:** Not a specific childhood memory but more a sense of place, a sense of location, an overall sense of a mood or a state of mind, a state of consciousness that was happening in that location.

**DK: And so you return to that again and again?**

**SP:** Yeah, and I like to look at these events... a lot of times they're not specific events but more lengthy passages of time that... get distilled and simplified by using symbolic imagery. So specific structures, specific trees, specific landscape... It might not signify just one single moment, but a period of years in which certain life changes happened or in which certain situations arose or problems came to the surface and got resolved. So symbolically, the locations of the settings of the narratives leave room for me to indicate aspects of the specific moment or a specific narrative, but also provide a venue for those things to... play out, that I can revisit again and again, and it allows me to change how I feel about those things, and ...recognize, as I get older, how some of those things have also influenced other aspects of my life, other bodies of work. And so... it's very important to me to have something that's fluid and open to interpretation, not only for myself after I finish making it, or even during the process of making it, but for a viewer to be able to look at a piece and insert themselves into it through the way that I create a composition, or through the way I leave things...understated, so that there's still room for the meanings to evolve and change.

I don't like things that are static and completely finished because...it sums it up too neatly, I think...and to me, the poetry happens when there's room for even a drawing to change. Even if a drawing itself doesn't change, the meaning of it can change over time as it's examined in the

Cade Tompkins Projects  
198 Hope Street Providence Rhode Island 02906  
www.cadetompkins.com cadetompkins@mac.com  
Telephone 401 751 4888

context of my own mind, as it's examined in the context of a growing body of work that stems from that or comes after that... and so that sort of constant evolution and moving forward, taking a step back, reexamining, then moving forward even further, taking another look back, reexamining... this push and pull and...revisiting ideas, revisiting narratives is something that is a consistent practice as I'm generating material for future work.

**DK: So, some background...what is your artistic background? ...How did you get involved in making art?**

**SP:** ... You know, most artists will say, "Oh, ever since I was a kid!" and that's certainly true with me as well. I was interested in a lot of different things growing up; so I was interested in music, I was in an orchestra, I was interested in theater...

**DK: What instrument?**

**SP:** I played the cello for a long time. And in school I was involved in the theater productions, whether in the stage crew or in the pit orchestra, sometimes in the productions...sometimes I was writing a play that got produced by students...and so that was something that was really interesting to me. I was involved in language studies a lot, I was always reading and writing a lot on my own... it didn't really lead to art school until I got to college because it was just a hobby growing up. When I got to college, I majored in painting, and then I picked up two other majors, art history and French, so I went through five years of college. I was...juggling these three majors, but they were all...informing each other and supporting each other and so it felt like I couldn't leave any of them by the wayside. It was really important for me to follow through and have all three of those, because at that point I wasn't sure if I wanted to go in an art history direction, in which case I would need the French, and I would need to add German at some point, or I wanted to follow the studio path and try to make it as an artist.

After college... I found that some of my printmaking work that I'd done at the end of college was getting more attention than my painting at that time, so my etchings and things like that, even though I was relatively new to the medium...I got accepted into RISD on the basis of my etching work.... When I went to RISD, I started working in other mediums besides etching, so I was working with woodcuts and a little bit of silk screen, and incorporating hand painting and hand drawing into my work... right off the bat I started incorporating printmaking and drawing and painting. [I bridged] these two different modes of making, these two different modes of thinking... and two cohesive bodies of work. I was always... working in a series [with my paintings and etchings], where there's either an overtly obvious narrative or maybe a more subtle implied narrative...working in serial imagery that was intended to be shown as one body of work...Occasionally I'll work in single eruptions of an idea, but typically the serial narrative is something that holds my attention because it does have that element of time...You're often working through a theme or a motif or an idea over the course of a year or months, and I think that allows for some of that change and some of those parallels between the work and my present

Cade Tompkins Projects  
198 Hope Street Providence Rhode Island 02906  
www.cadetompkins.com cadetompkins@mac.com  
Telephone 401 751 4888

life to really coalesce in a body of work... I think work that is slow and takes a long time to execute allows for these connections.

**DK: Because it has the capacity to change course...**

**SP:** Yes, exactly, and to ...reflect what's going on in my own life at the time, or to show me things about my life that I didn't necessarily know at the outset.

**DK: All right...I had all these questions laid out, because when I do email interviews, I don't really get to build off of what someone says, and so I...have to explicitly ask for all the information that I want, but you're answering pretty much all my questions—which is great—without me having to ask them... last question: what do you hope that people take away from your work...specifically, the show in the List?**

**SP:** Hmm...

**DK: This is my favorite closing question to ask in every interview.**

**SP:** I think that it's important for people to understand that a work doesn't have to be monumental in scope to be really meaningful and to carry a lot of meaning and to really communicate things to viewers. So while some of the work may be very large or span a number of feet across a wall, the things that are sometimes really important are just focusing on intimate moments within the work, within the image...and the ways in which the visual language that's used enhances or reveals something even more about what the imagery conveys as well. So... I think that for me it's important that the work is tied to my life and that it carries a lot of meaning for myself; my hope is that through my intense involvement with the imagery and the connection to the work I make, somehow it will take on a bit of a universality that will allow other people to not necessarily understand me as a person, but to understand something about their own lives or something about the world. I try to make work that is intensely personal, but not to the point of excluding a viewer or answering all the questions...I like people to come away with questions that are not always summed up or resolved, and also to just have a moment where they get drawn into the work, they get drawn into the story or the narrative or the play of color or the mark-making, the line... a lot of the work...asks for a viewer to spend time with it because there are a few different stages of viewing. A lot of it is large, so you can view it from a distance, then it... keeps revealing more and more detail the closer you get. I think it asks for the viewer to engage with it...and to also...connect whatever that piece is with the pieces that surround it or whatever else is in that body of work or whatever else is in the room as well. I'd like for people to look for motifs and to make connections between the bodies of work and between the...visual elements and the narrative elements in the work and derive something from that that hopefully holds meaning for them as well as a viewer.

**DK: I'll put my motif-hunting cap on next time I'm a monitor.... All right, thank you! It was a delight.**

**SP:** Thanks so much!