

Structural Beauty : Sharon Dowell
an interview with Martin "the Clown" Barry



You have seen her work. Pieces have been showing up all over the city for the past six years. Walk by or through almost any building in Charlotte and your vision can be filled with her compositions and messages. Today, we would like to introduce you to the person behind the work and perhaps acquire a piece for your home. Ladies and gentlemen, please meet Sharon Dowell.

CLOWN: Tell the people a little about your background, your education, and formative times that made you the artist you are today.

SHARON DOWELL: Since the age of three, I always knew I wanted to be an artist. As a child, art was my escape. I grew up in Houston, Texas. I studied illustration and painting at UNC-Charlotte and went to graduate school for Arts Administration at Winthrop University. Mr. Williams, my high school art teacher, was a key mentor and encourager in my life. He taught me important lessons about letting go, happy accidents, and that not every piece of paper or canvas is precious. One must try different approaches and make mistakes to grow. In my 20's, I worked my way up to Director at Center of the Earth Gallery, a beloved contemporary art gallery in NoDa that was around for 22+ years. That experience taught me how to talk about and sell art, it fine tuned my client development, and exposed me to the basics of running a business in the arts.

CLOWN: What artists would you say are influential to your style?

SHARON DOWELL: Mickalene Thomas, Hope Gangloff, Richard Diebenkorn, Cy Twombly, Wayne Thiebaud, and Henri Matisse. Their color palettes, compositions, and unusual application of materials inspires me.

CLOWN: When you landed on your signature style, did it come as an epiphany, or had you been building slowly toward what we see today?

SHARON DOWELL: It was a slow build during college. The more I painted, the more I discovered what I wanted to say and how to reflect my concepts. My UNC-Charlotte Professor, Jamie Franki, encouraged me with simple yet

great advice, saying that when I hit on a piece that excited me, to create 6-10 more in that vein and have a show. I started to discover my style of texture, vibrant colors, and layers. I first began with heavily illustrative works depicting the melting pot of New York City conveying the variety of cultures, people, and styles I saw there. I was heavily sheltered growing up, so you can imagine how much the big apple blew me away the first time I visited. I then moved toward architecture as another way to capture the energy of place.

CLOWN: Your work conveys certain feelings and messages from this interviewer's perspective. What are the key things that you are hoping to convey to viewers in any given piece?

SHARON DOWELL: Intertwining themes course through my vibrant, layered works. Recent travels abroad have especially impacted my art. Interested in the documentation of memory and place, I strive to find beauty in often overlooked structures and spaces. At times, commentaries on the changing environment and political or social references surface. I incorporate the vigor, tension, and perceptions of an environment, often reflecting a sense of locality and history. In my public art works, community and location are key to me in creating a visually stimulating space with which people will connect. Additionally, my background in arts administration lends me a unique perspective and capacity for creating and developing impacting and engaging public art. I enjoy the challenge of working within set parameters to find creative solutions, melding my artistic and business skills together. I firmly believe that creative *place making* communicates distinctiveness and generates connections across communities.

CLOWN: Is there a day that you do not create something, or are you putting something together every single day?

SHARON DOWELL: Alas, there are many days when I do not create: when I am applying for opportunities, meeting with clients or community leaders, or handling the often un-fun administrative tasks required to run a business. Since becoming an LLC a year ago, I am finding that a good chunk of my time is devoted to this.



CLOWN: What have you found to be frustrating in your work lately?

SHARON DOWELL: That censorship is still alive and well and in places where you would not expect.

CLOWN: Do you have pieces you have done that you keep all to yourself?

SHARON DOWELL: I have one that I painted of myself and my husband from back when we were first dating and everything was sparkly. It has our astrological chart lines imbedded in the background. Other than that, most everything is on the "For Sale" table.

CLOWN: You are commissioned to paint a huge piece anywhere in the world. What's the first choice?

SHARON DOWELL: Somewhere in Barcelona, please! It's next on my list to visit. The architecture and vibrant nature of the city intrigues me.

CLOWN: Your mural, A City On Its Side, tells the current tale of Charlotte through your vision. What would an ideal Charlotte look like to you?

SHARON DOWELL: A place where people with conflicting perspectives and ideas can actually hear each other. We are so polarized right now in our thinking (nationally, too). It has been an odd year with a lot of strife; my husband and I have lost friends we have known and interacted with for years. Folks can pick and choose who they interact with much more easily than in the past. People can choose to live in bubble worlds wherein everyone they know agrees with them and is into the same things as them. Healthy dialogue is a challenge. It's a strange time. At TedxCharlotte 2016, I saw an excellent talk originally given at TedxCreative Coast last year: "10 Ways To Have A Better Conversation" by Celeste Headlee. If we could all watch that and take those tips to heart, our city and world would be much improved.

Sharon Dowell works list:

- A City On Its Side 2016 : acrylic mural 9'h x 25'w
UNC-Charlotte Center City Building, 1st floor
- Charlotte Buddy Bear 2014 : acrylic on prefabricated sculpture 2 meters h
Main Public Library (corner of Tryon and 6th St.)
- Common Market Is Good : commission for Chuck Barger, Common Market SouthEnd owner 48" x 48"
- Midwood : Acrylic on canvas 36" x 60"
- They Never Saw The Ocean 2013 : acrylic on canvas 48"h x 120"w
- Transition : acrylic on canvas 48" x 48"
- Truss/Trust 2016 : acrylic mural 23'h x 30'w
UNC-Charlotte Center City Building
- Truss II : acrylic on canvas 72" x 48"

Check out more at www.SharonDowell.com.