

**S**ierra Lonepine Briano is bold and confrontational. Her gaze is direct. Her laugh is raucous. Her hair is as short as her fingernails. And her art is a lot like she is. With a boyish grin, she admits, "I like to shock people."

Briano was born in San Francisco and raised in Richmond, Calif. "I have always painted some," she begins, but she is not proud of her early works. Her first painting was "a bunch of grapes on driftwood," she says, calling it "trite" and "corny" and laughing at how much her work has changed in the 34 years since.

"I was a hippie," she says, describing her early years. "I used to hitchhike."

Briano traveled throughout the Pacific Northwest, Mexico and Canada. She had a son and moved to Oregon when she was 21.

"I lived in various hippie communes, drank, took drugs and came out at 28," she says. Like so many people at the time, "I tuned in, turned on and dropped out."

Briano moved to Portland at 32 and "vaguely began to study art," she recalls. When her interest increased, she stayed sober and began art studies in earnest.

"Going to Marylhurst was a rare decision. Up until then, I just did things. I never made decisions. But I wanted art school, even though it was certainly not practical," she says, referring to how few people actually make money in the field. In 1989, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts.

Art school helped Briano find her style. "I had tried to paint women from old photos, but I felt that they looked dead," she recalls. "Then I took advice from a male art teacher. He told me that most artists are not successful until they did what they really wanted to do. I knew I really wanted to paint big naked women. That was the desire that came from inside me. I knew if I were a Beaverton housewife, I would not want to paint big naked women." She guffaws at her own statement.

Briano began painting nudes on large canvasses. She used rich colors to give the women passion and sexuality. Those brazen images became her *Broken Hearted Butch Madonnas*, which, she says, are all self-portraits.

"I was very nervous about showing these portraits. It was a very personal body of work. I felt very vulnerable. I worried about how I would feel if people didn't like it."

It surprised Briano how much people did like it. "It was my first crossover work," she says, "because a lot of people could relate to it. I wasn't thinking of it as universal. I was just

## The butch Madonna

Sierra Lonepine Briano likes big bones and battle-axes

BY HERON

trying to save my ass [from having my heart broken]. It was very therapeutic."

Early on, Briano's passions expanded to include helping other aspiring female artists and writers hone their talents. In 1989, she, Jemma Crae and Jean Mountaingrove founded Dyke Art Camp in southern Oregon.

In 1992, Briano received a grant from the Metropolitan Arts Council to paint the visual history of lesbians. The result was *Out of the Shadows—200 Years of Lesbian Lifestyle*. "I painted lots of butchy women," she says with pride.

Briano emphasizes the love and support she receives from her partner of more than

nine years, Marg Greenhut, a therapist. Together they bought property in Gaston, remodeled the house and turned the barn into a studio. "We wanted to create a northern Dyke Art Camp," she says.

In 1996, they opened ArtSprings, a writers and artists retreat, which is also a tiny bed



From Briano's Goddess series



Sierra Lonepine Briano relaxes at ArtSprings; she inspired her self-portrait series *Broken Hearted Butch Madonnas* (above right); *Big Bones* (inset) opens Dec. 27

and breakfast. Their summer workshops teach paper making, clay, watercolors, life drawing, book binding and acrylics.

Last year, Briano painted a mural at Portland International Airport titled *Women with Wings—Oregon Women in Aviation*. She grins, "I got to paint a lot of cute old-time dykey women in that."

Briano is considering a change in focus. "I got a lot of notoriety in the past. But I have had enough of being famous. Now I want to be rich."

To that end, the artist has created numerous projects for herself, including a line of greeting cards and handmade books and paper, all of which she sells at Irvington Flower Market. She also makes wearable art she calls "Road Kill." The assemblages of beads, bottle caps and hardware scraps are made into pins, boa clips and, possibly later on, necklaces.

She sells the jewelry at friends' homes. "I call this the dyke version of Avon," she quips.

Later this month ONDA Gallery in Northeast Portland will display Briano's painting series *Big Bones*. The show features 34- by 40-inch canvasses—each featuring one huge bone.

"I like to force the viewer to look at something they would not otherwise look at, something like Georgia O'Keefe. I have to credit her for inspiring me to paint huge objects, straight on."

The bones are from animals, each with different shapes. "I collect bones," she croons. "I just love looking at them. Bones imply death but are full of life for me." Multiple layers of oil paint give each bone a leathery richness that jumps out from its solid, contrasting background.

Briano's work in progress is an oil painting series tentatively titled *Witches, Crones, Hags and Battle-axes*. "I am positive I can paint some very butchy, outrageous female images out of that." ■

*BIG BONES* by Sierra Lonepine Briano will be on display Dec. 27 to Jan. 29 at ONDA Gallery, 2215 N.E. Alberta St.

HERON is a Portland artist and free-lance writer.

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