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**ART**

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**Julia Waco: straight artist on a queer mission**

BY MEG DALY

It's only fitting that painter Julia Waco's day job is as a public defender. This is a woman who wants to make a difference in people's lives, both in her profession and in her art.

As a way of contributing positive images of lesbian couples to mainstream society, Waco will open her latest show, *Lola Sweetlips*, Sept. 5 at the Attic Gallery in Portland.

The petite 32-year-old sits across from me at the Heathman lounge, brimming with excitement for the new show. She spent several months interviewing lesbians about their love lives, starting with a friend at work and branching out from there. She asked individuals and couples to describe various important milestones in their relationships, which became the basis for the bright, whimsical paintings.

"Crowning MerQueen," which features two mermaids with their red and yellow tails entwined against a backdrop of a Van Gogh-like starry night, depicts when one couple first knew they really loved each other. Another, titled "Becoming," subtly portrays a PG version of an S/M scene.

The question burns. "Why lesbians?" I ask Waco, who identifies as straight and has never had a sexual relationship with a woman. She explains the series grew out of her previous show—*Kisses for Carlos*, paintings of gay men in love. That series was a gift to a close friend who is gay. It was a huge success.

Female viewers of *Kisses* told her they wished for images of women in love. "So I had to do it," she says, adding she knows what it's like to feel different.

As a Jew whose grandparents are concentration camp survivors, Waco feels an obligation to try to make the world a better place—one in which all people feel included.

Originally from Los Angeles, Waco now lives in Tigard with her husband. Though she's been painting since she was 13 and

has taken a lot of classes, she's not an art school grad but rather a Lewis & Clark law school alum. Her creative side survived by doodling on paper coffee cups and napkins.

Since graduation, she's worked full time as a lawyer and devoted herself to evening and weekend painting, producing several themed shows. Her first, *Bob Loves Dorese*, was featured at Borders. That's when her gay friend told her how he wanted to see images of two men holding hands.

"I hope the paintings help bridge a gap in public perception of gay and lesbian couples," says Waco,

who thinks people focus too much on the physical part of same-sex relationships and ignore the commonalities all lovers share. She hopes her work can help the straight world get more comfortable with images of queers in love "so that the concepts of health care benefits for same-sex partners or same-sex marriage or adoption, or two women just holding hands" are more readily accepted.

Waco calls her style "representational whimsy," in which creatures and objects become metaphors for the content of the story. Her color palette is ripe with bright greens, deep blues and reds as well as softer grays, yellows



"Ceremony" is a blending of body and spirit

*Girls Next Door: Into the Heart of Lesbian America* and the fictional *The Riverhouse Stories: How Pubah S. Queen & Lazy Larue Save the*

*World.* And then, of course, there were the real women's stories.

"It's been so rewarding," Waco says of the entire interviewing and painting process. She is grateful to the women who shared their lives with her and says their stories have deepened her understanding of love and how to make a good partnership last.

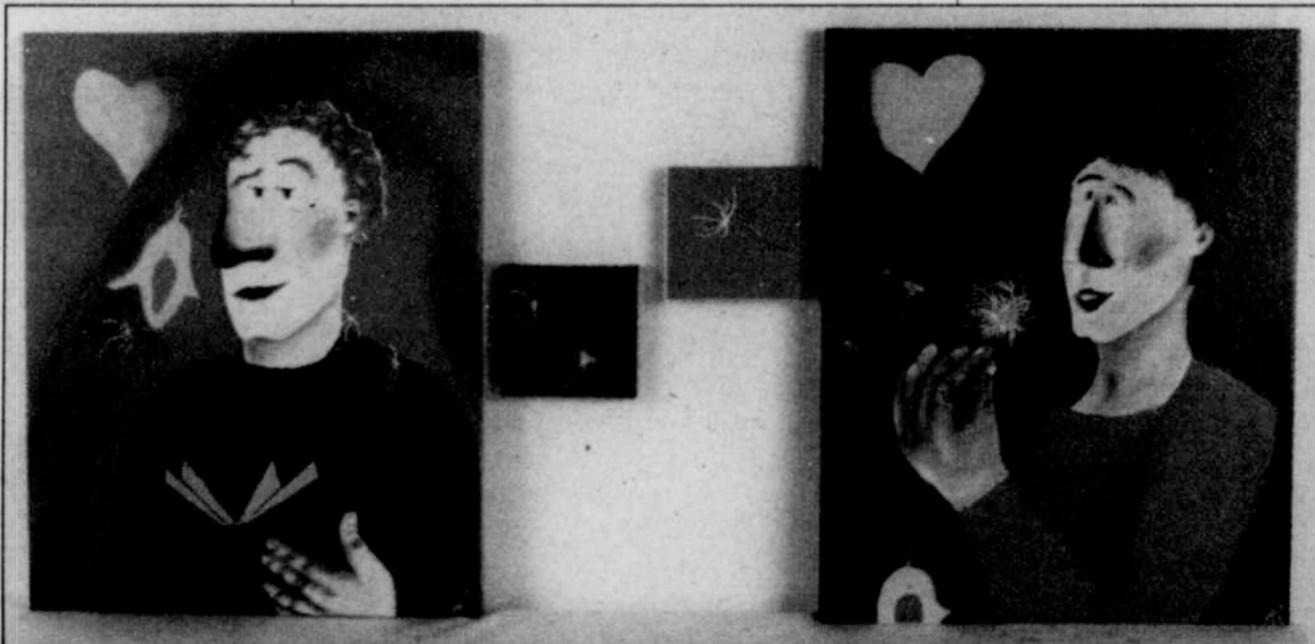
"I think about the women in the painting 'Light,'" she says, referring to the image of two women on a sunny hill chasing the dark "depression" bird back into its hailstorm. "It's kind of like the necessity of cleaning up and examining those dark places inside so that there is room for another person to move into your heart."

Waco is hopeful that *Lola Sweetlips* will be well attended; she has canvassed the streets with information about the show and about her slide show presentation at *In Other Words*, which will also include a discussion of *Kisses for Carlos*.

A successful art show of lesbian subjects might just convince other galleries to display lesbian work as well. What other straight artist do you know who has that as her mission? ■

Julie Waco's *LOLA SWEETLIPS* is on display Sept. 5 to 28 at the Attic Gallery, 206 S.W. First Ave. The artist's slide show presentation is 6:30 p.m. Aug. 29 at *In Other Words*, 3734 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

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"Hoping to Meet Mr. Right" from *Kisses for Carlos*

and pinks. Common among many of the paintings is a black and white cat, which both represents a real person's pet and also participates in the telling of the story.

Citing Chagall and Alex Calder as her main influences, Waco strives for a balance of color and light, where one aspect of the painting anchors another. Typically, she likes to work on large, wall-size canvases, but for *Lola* she's created paintings in a more standard size range—18 inches by 20 inches, for example. She works in acrylic on canvas and then covers the finished painting in a gloss that gives them a good sheen.

As part of her research on lesbian communities and lifestyles, the artist consulted the nonfiction book *The*



Julia Waco puts gay and lesbian relationships on view

PHOTOS BY ALAN MORRIS