

contemporary calico

JAM TOLLES EXPLORES GENDER IDENTITY AND TRANSITIONING THROUGH ART

BY ALEX V. CIPOLLE

A painting by Jam Tolles reminds me of “Las Meninas,” the enigmatic 1656 painting by Diego Velázquez, even though visually the two have little in common.

Velázquez’s oil masterpiece depicts members of the Spanish Court in a grand drawing room with a mirror, the figures peering back at you as if you were some sort of peculiar guest popping in.

Tolles filled ketchup bottles with acrylic paint and gooped hundreds of flowers on reflective mylar panels, creating amorphous mirrored pools that reflect the viewer between the blooms.

What the two pieces share is this: They both implicate the viewer, tangling what it means to observe and to be observed, disrupting perceptions.

“For me, it was a way to picture myself in a feminine identity,” Tolles says. “The first girl clothes I ever owned were from my girlfriend in undergrad.” She gave Tolles floral leggings.

“This is probably the best place I can imagine,” she says of Eugene while sitting at a sidewalk table at The Wayward Lamb pub and nightclub, a place she describes as an anchor for the local queer community. Tolles also points to Trans*ponder, the transgender resource and support nonprofit, as vital. She says in a larger city, these resources and people would be more geographically spread out.

“Getting out of grad school was kind of the first time in a long time where I was like: I’m free,” Tolles says. “I’ve just found a group of people here organically that are queer and supportive and reinforcing of what I am.”

That’s not to say this transition has always been smooth sailing.

“It’s a push and pull — making one step forward in your life and then experiencing the social repercussions,” she says, adding: “But still, being out is being visible and being vulnerable and being targetable.”

Despite the risks, Tolles says she feels more comfortable



‘DOUGHNUTDNA (OUT TO PLAY) ELMO & BIG BIRD (CHAOS & HARMONY) DEATH WAITS ANOTHER DAY’ AND TWO PANELS OF ‘CALICO (MY FIRST GIRL CLOTHES)’

This piece is “Calico (My First Girl Clothes),” consisting of four large panels. Two panels will be on display at the Eugene-Springfield Pride Festival Aug. 13, as well as at a show of Tolles’ new work, *Grape Jelly*, opening Aug. 12 at WOW Hall.

This spring Tolles completed an MFA at the University of Oregon School of Architecture and Allied Arts, where she honed skills in multimedia painting and performance art that explored the fluidity of gender identity and sexuality in contemporary culture.

She is also a founding member of the puckish contemporary art collective Tropical Contemporary.

“I’ve only identified as transgender in the last year or two,” Tolles says. “With my art, I think it was really important because I could explore things conceptually with painting and colors, and maybe that was a coping mechanism too. I was afraid socially to wear a dress outside, but I could paint a dress.”

Upon graduation, Tolles recalls her professors asking her, as an artist and a trans woman, “Why aren’t you in New York, L.A., Berlin?”

with herself, and her lifelong struggle with depression and anxiety seems to be waning.

When the mass shooting happened at Pulse nightclub June 12 in Orlando, Tolles was working on another painting — “DoughnutDNA (Out to Play) Elmo & Big Bird (Chaos and Harmony) Death Waits Another Day.” The piece, featuring Big Bird’s midsection, a pile of Elmo heads and floating doughnuts, morphed into a meditation on the loss of innocence. A green helicopter hovers ominously in the background as a reminder.

“There’s always something that’s going to force you back into reality,” Tolles says. She adds with a laugh: “And there’s something metaphysical about doughnuts spinning through space.”

*Jam Tolles will be volunteering at the Trans*ponder booth at the Eugene-Springfield Pride Festival, which runs noon to 6 pm Saturday, Aug. 13, at Alton Baker Park. Follow @jamtolles on Instagram to see more work.*



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER