

Artist DeeDee Cheriell tells me a story about giving up cigarettes.

“I was incredibly grumpy, just more like an animal than a human,” Cheriell says.

Around this time she recalls watching *Grizzly Man*, the 2005 Werner Herzog documentary about a man who tried to live with bears and, well, let’s just say the bears won.

“I was very moved and touched by that story, but at the same time I had just quit smoking,” she says. “I just repeatedly painted this bear over and over again; it was a representation of me at the moment.”

And there are so many glorious snarling bears in Cheriell’s paintings. The Los Angeles-based artist born and raised in Eugene depicts the grizzled beasts as defiant in their beauty, heads thrown back in the agony of denying habitual ecstasies — part self-portrait, part commentary on consumer culture and the Buddhist idea that to desire is to suffer. Shooting from their cherry-red mouths rimmed with stark white teeth are roars captured in graphic patterns, like a spotlight of sound.

“The process of painting helps to process these difficult emotions,” Cheriell explains.

The artist grew up in Eugene, where her life of sound and color began, the daughter of an American mother and a father from India. The natural environment of the Pacific Northwest remains prominent in her mind’s eye, she says, recalling how her mother always took the family camping, cultivating what Cheriell describes as her spiritual connection to nature.

“I just find it so incredibly beautiful and peaceful,” she says of Eugene and its environs. “Getting to paint about nature brings me back.”

It was here that her creative career sparked. There was no television at home and her mother was a kindergarten teacher, so Cheriell found herself surrounded by art supplies, a fertile place for her to learn to draw and paint.

The South Eugene High School graduate also started drumming in “all-girl rock bands” like The Teenangels, The Hindi Guns and Adickdid, the legendary proto-riot grrrl band for which Beck opened, and which in turn opened for Fugazi and Hole. Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill was even her roommate once. While in the PNW

music scene, Cheriell got deep into silk-screening gig posters and creating album art, drawn to the punk DIY iconography.

While the PNW seeps into her contemporary paintings, her heritage on her father’s side cannot be understated.

“I went to India to visit my family and I was fascinated by the use of images to tell stories,” Cheriell says. “I wanted to sort of mimic that idea with a contemporary twist to it.



PHOTO: STEVEN PERILLOUX

DEEDEE CHERIELL IN HER L.A. STUDIO

I tried to use imagery I liked to tell stories that were more relatable to people in my geography and time period.”

At the University of Oregon, Cheriell took a class on Indian temple imagery. These Indian influences can now be found in her color palette — neon pastels against inky blues — and the imagery of geometric mandalas or Hindu gods and goddesses with the heads of bears and birds.

Cheriell traveled the world, but it was the semi-autobiographical film *Down and Out with the Dolls* that

she created with an old flame — a movie about her time in girl bands — that opened the door to Los Angeles, where she now lives with husband and child.

In her backyard, her friend recently built an art studio constructed from bits and pieces of buildings he found in Mexico; she describes the space as a tranquil bird’s nest where she tries to paint every day.

“L.A. is a great place to be creative,” she says. “The film industry really loves supporting art.” In fact, one of her bear paintings can easily be spotted in a scene from the 2013 film *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*.

Cheriell now shows and sells her art all over the world. An exhibit of her work recently closed in London, and a new one will open this December in Los Angeles.

Her work has transformed since she quit smoking. The bears still make appearances, but her compositions have zoomed out, so to speak, focusing less on one dominant figure and instead on many figures — reminiscent of the busy compositions of embroidered Hmong folk art. And she has started to employ a multi-color swirled brushstroke technique in her depictions of icebergs, coyotes and the sun.

Cheriell’s tableaux also bring to mind the flattened landscapes and ominous mood of the 20th-century post-Impressionist painter Henri Rousseau, but instead of jungle flora and fauna, she paints men’s bodies topped with burning houses, women with horse heads, birds in Victorian garb and trees that read books and cry, to name a few of her inventions.

The artist has described painting as a way of exorcising unresolved emotions.

“I guess there is a certain time when painting becomes almost like therapy,” she says.

Cheriell frequently visits her hometown — her mother still lives here — and even daydreams about moving her family back here some day, although she wonders if Eugene’s economy can support full-time visual artists.

Regardless, Cheriell says she may soon return to Eugene to work on a mural commission. She has painted murals in London and L.A., and it’s due time she painted the snarling bear in all of us here in Eugene.

To follow the artist’s work, visit deedeecheriell.com.

OPPOSITE: ‘ILLUMINATING THE SUBLIME’ • LEFT: ‘SOJOURN INTO BEING’ • RIGHT: ‘DARK NIGHT SOLILOQUY’

