“Art should be a conversation starter, not just wall covering,” Rachel SV Parry, a 28-year-old artist working in Toronto’s west end said. “A lot of people have a very specific image of what can be on a wall, and my art doesn’t fit the criteria for most.”

Parry’s work is more than a little weird. Her latest series of paintings
depicts crowned frogs: one cradling a guitar, another applying lipstick, and yet another seated at a bar with a tiny pint.

An earlier series, *Humanimals*, morphs animals and people. This series ranges from a woman with the face of an anglerfish, to a nude anthropomorphic unicorn smoking a cigar in outer space. Not the usual gallery fare.

Born and raised in Kanata, ON, Parry always knew she wanted to be an artist.

“Other than [wanting to be] a doctor for one day,” Parry said. “There might have been a day I wanted to be an astronaut too. On those days my parents were proud.”

She started developing her unique style when she moved to Toronto to study fine art at York University. What she remembers from her early art class are collages.

“We would cut pieces out of magazines and put them together and all the other kids would put together pieces that sort of made sense,” Parry said.

She found these collages boring and would distort subjects, placing an old man’s head on a baby’s body, or play with perspective. Her current surrealist paintings retain an echo of her early collage style.

“It made no sense but it was a lot more interesting,” Parry said. “If I can make it mean more than one thing to me then I don’t get bored of the idea before I finish painting it.”
She quit a year and a half into this program. She kept drawing, scribbling on pages in her school books, and finally established herself as a professional artist two years ago.

Parry works out of the Rose Will Studio. Located at 1630 Dundas Street West, just west of Dufferin Street in Toronto’s trendy DuWest neighbourhood.

Surrounded by cafes, restaurants, and a few remaining sports bars, the studio opened a little over a year ago, in October 2012. It also serves as a shared space for a collective of 10 artists. She and the owner are the only two who are there full time and make a living exclusively from their work.

“I can’t wait a week. I have to work on it solidly for hours or days or however long it takes to finish it. It’s so

The DuWest neighbourhood is home to more than a dozen galleries, but while she appreciates the quality of the work, she finds the spaces sterile.

“The walls are so white, and [each gallery] has 10 pieces in it total,” Parry said. “When I go into them I feel like I’m in a space ship, and there are little windows and you can see different worlds in them, which is neat, but it’s not home.”

In contrast, Rose Will Studio is pleasantly cluttered. Art in varying styles and sizes are positioned
frustrating to me if I have to wait even more than 20 minutes between layers.”

– Rachel SV Parry

next to each other and cover every available inch of wall space.

In addition, easels display some larger works, and tables are stacked with smaller pieces. There’s a couch, a television, and an as-yet undecorated holiday tree propped against a pillar.

On the coffee table sits a pack of smokes and a bowl of Granny Smiths, though they aren’t prep for a still life. “These are for eating,” she said with a laugh. The space is refreshingly unpretentious.

Today she is seated on the floor in a white tank top and dark oversized zip hoody. Her long red hair is unbound, and her “art pants,” as she calls them, are so spattered in paint as to look like a lost Jackson Pollock.

In front of her are three 8 x 10” canvases. She’s working on a series of tree dancers, two of which are commissioned projects.
She admits to being impatient, and so tends to work on multiple pieces at the same time so that she can switch between them. As one piece dries, she continues work on another. It’s why she doesn’t work with oils – they take too long to dry.

“I can’t wait a week,” Parry said. “I have to work on it solidly for hours or days or however long it takes to finish it. It’s so frustrating to me if I have to wait even more than 20 minutes between layers.”

In addition to the three tree dancers, there are three canvases leaning against a pillar in the middle of the room. Only the backgrounds have been painted, but she’s already decided on the foregrounds for the finished paintings.

She’s constantly working on new pieces, and typically paints between three and five pieces on a given week, though when working on smaller pieces she may paint as many as 10. Every few months the studio hosts an exhibit, displaying new work from artists in the collective.

Parry’s work sells for an average of $400 per piece. Smaller 8 x 10″ pieces go for $40, and larger 30 x 40″ pieces go for $1,200. Prices can vary depending on the scale and complexity of a piece.

In addition to the studio, Parry’s work has also been shown in cafes and sex clubs. She likes the idea of having her work displayed in public spaces, places “where people can come and go, and make their own connections.”

It comes as no surprise that Salvador Dali and MC Escher are two of her favourite artists. Parry also finds inspiration in psychology, particularly “how easy it is to trigger a response from an unnerving visual.”
She describes her own work as balanced somewhere “between cute and scary.” Her inspiration comes from what’s happening around her.

With the Humanimal pieces, her human models suggested the animals they’d like to be. She found it an interesting entree into her subjects’ minds, a kind of “psychological exploration.”

She says she’s not picky about sources, whether she gets an image from a dream or something funny she’s heard. “I have a piece that’s — it’s a dirty joke — it’s a lake of breasts with a motorboat driving across it, and it’s called ‘HMS Milkshakes.’”

“I try to make a point to never take anything too seriously,” Parry said. “It’s a wasted day if I haven’t laughed at least once. They say simple minds are amused by simple things, but I think it takes a certain complexity to find humour in the little things. If I can present that for someone else to see, then that’s a life win for me.”


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