

American Icons **Bettie Page and Olivia De Berardinis**

Olivia De Berardinis has produced some of the most recognizable popular art of the last thirty years – even launching *Airbrush Action*'s first issue with her cover art called “Zebra Lady” in 1986.

Airbrush Action magazine recently spoke at length with Olivia and her husband, Joel Beren, by phone from their home in California. We discussed her new book, *Bettie Page*, and Olivia and Joel explained many details of their creative process and ongoing work.

Influences

Olivia cites many influences on her painting. Two of them are Alberto Vargas and George Petty.

Alberto Vargas came to the U.S. from Peru in the early 1920s. His paintings for *Esquire* magazine in the 1930s and '40s were passed around, copied, painted onto combat aircraft, and put Vargas' images of vibrant American womanhood firmly in the imaginations of the World War II generation of men and women alike. Alberto Vargas had found the airbrush when it was an emerging tool, and used it along with traditional illustration techniques.

Vargas' contemporary, George Petty, started using an airbrush to produce his advertising illustrations in Chicago in the 1930s, and likewise graduated to glamorous pinup art of all-American women, also for *Esquire*, and for other markets such as calendars.

Olivia De Berardinis was born in 1948, when the giants, Vargas and Petty, were in their heyday. Olivia's interest in figure art goes back to her earliest memories of first lifting pencil to paper. In her book *Let Them Eat Cheesecake*, she writes, “Being an only child, I would sit for hours, just as I do today and lose myself in the drawings.”

Evolving Style

Olivia began publishing her paintings, showing her evolving style, in some of the men's magazines of the mid-1970s. She studied Vargas' and Petty's techniques and painted obsessively, continuing to seek critique and improvement for a style of art that was thought of as perhaps quaint or passé. Sticking with it, she started to gain public recognition of her unique style. Her art began to branch out to greeting cards and other items, and was noticed by Hugh Hefner, and published in *Playboy*.

Early on, she decided that the use of watercolor washes with artists' brushes allowed her freedom and subtlety, as did her airbrush choice – the Paasche AB, which flows paint through an offset, rotating turbine nozzle. It's a precise instrument, and can be finicky like all airbrushes. But it's remained Olivia's favorite.

We asked how she's consistently achieved such accurate proportion and elegance in her paintings. Sometimes she starts with, and refers to, photo reference; her husband Joel has always helped take, print, and manage the reference photography. But Olivia is clear that "good draftsmanship," starting with concept sketches that go from the rough to the specific, are key to her successful paintings.

For some paintings, Olivia drafts multiple concepts and works out details on successive sheets of tracing paper. You can clearly see the influence of fashion illustration in the roots of her painstaking renderings and finished products.

New Magazine Work

Olivia is back publishing regularly in the pages of *Playboy*.

She explains, "These are all new pieces. Hef [*Playboy's* founder and editor] was using a Bettie Page illustration every other month. One day, he started liking traditional pinup [art] again, and we agreed to run one of my paintings in each issue. It was a struggle, because I had to juggle doing the new Bettie Page book and my growing work for *Playboy*."

We asked how long it takes, on the average, to produce one of these monthly illustrations.

"Oh. That answer varies. Some of them come quickly. Some are more difficult. Sometimes one week. Now, we're talking about a 30-by-40 inch original work on illustration board. Plus, it's not always agreed which image will make it into print for a given month, so I may paint several.

"For example, in the course of preparing issues of *Playboy*, Hef drops hints that more illustrations are needed. Joel might shoot several of my final paintings on film, which he scans, makes inkjet printouts, and then delivers the prints to the *Playboy* offices. Hef keeps them in his office, and after a while, then he'll decide. But we never know which one Hef will pick until the magazine's art department requests a 4-by-5 inch transparency of the final painting."

"I can lose all sense of time. It's not a clean division between one painting and another. They overlap. We might start on several, and one takes a life of its own. Or a technique used in one might suggest a change to another, or even a new work. You really have to stay open-minded and keep fresh ideas coming."

Process

Olivia has written about her creative processes in detail in her published works (see the bibliography at the end of this article). But we asked her about her recent paintings, and how her methods continue to evolve.

“For the Bettie Page book, Joel collected reference photos of Bettie Page. He has an extensive collection of vintage photos. Those are a good start. Or I may rework an older painting or concept.”

Back when she started painting, Olivia reminisces, “We started looking in detail at Vargas’ paintings, in a book of his work by Reid Stewart Austin. In fact, we met Vargas on our honeymoon! He was such a gentleman, and so free and conversational regarding his work.”

She then goes into more detail regarding her technique. “I use very light watercolor washes with sable brushes. Normally, my airbrush work comes later, towards the end. That’s because very light [transparent] washes can be adjusted. I use the airbrush at the last minute, to polish the painting. Once you use the airbrush, the painting’s *very* difficult to rework.”

Olivia is attached to her airbrush model. “For years, I have used the Paasche AB, with the buzzing turbine tip. People ask me if it’s hard to use, and why I don’t switch to, say, an Iwata, but for me it works. Iwatas are beautiful airbrushes, shiny and elegant. But my Paasche AB is something I started with, and I’m comfortable with it. My issue is subtlety. I am so used to the AB and I know I’m going to paint very finely-dusted areas and that’s critical to the way I paint.”

For Olivia, learning is a continuing process. “I’m always learning on the job!” she says. She goes on, “The hardest thing to learn is subtlety. Particularly when I started out. It’s easy to put paint on, it’s difficult to reverse course and take it off. I have ‘cooked’ so many paintings. I’d start to put on these washes of light fleshtones; but then who knows what’d happen? I’d add too much pigment, I’d paint when I should have taken a break, and suddenly, you look and the painting’s hopelessly dark in the wrong places. You have to start over. That can be very frustrating.”

We brought up one of Dru Blair’s mantras, “Subtlety is key.”

Olivia quickly responds, “What I’m learning is to use less. By that, I mean focusing on what’s really important in a painting. What’s important are the [model’s] eyes. The eyes communicate everything. They show mood, they show feeling.

“I’ve come to a point in my career where I’m almost “cartooning” the female figure. It’s a return to the style of the pinup masters – the real depiction of the charm and confidence of these women.”

She then adds, “I have to throw out information. I have to simplify. Many of my paintings have been detail-rich. Sometimes that’s not the best approach.”

In the Studio

When asked for other technical details, Olivia makes light of her studio setup. “I’m afraid we aren’t very modern. We have a system set up with CO2 tanks for our air supply. It works for us. I only use a small amount of gas anyway with my airbrush. And really, I don’t like the noise of a compressor. It starts and stops and frankly kind of startles me. I get so deep into it when I’m painting, and I don’t want that disturbed.”

Integration of Digital processes

Joel still uses a Hasselblad camera for model photography. “I haven’t gone digital because a lot of the genius of Olivia’s paintings lies in the details. For example, I may photograph a series of model poses, process the film, and print the proofs that Olivia uses to begin a painting. She might come to me and say, ‘I really need the detail on the eyes on this model,’ which might occupy a tiny part of the overall format. With film, there’s enough visual information to enlarge and work with the original film grain that I just haven’t seen possible with digital images. I get a clear enlargement in cases like that, and not a bunch of blurry pixels. And then Olivia has an accurate reference.”

“We do use a certain amount of digital studio support gear. I have a Mac hooked up to a photo printer – I’m still using an Epson 1280 inkjet. It prints on paper as large as 13-by-19 inches. I can make reasonably accurate proofs of color separations for the production or art departments to use as a start point.”

Advice for artists

We asked Olivia what she’d like to pass on to the artists reading this article. She ponders this, and begins, “I hope they enjoy what they’re doing. It’s possible to make a big mistake when you’re young, and become overwhelmed by the amount of work it takes to succeed. So dive in. Persistence does pay off. Stay on your own path. One foot in front of the other.”

She advises, “Success wasn’t guaranteed for me. You have to love what you’re doing.” She becomes passionate, adding, “It takes a love, and an obsessiveness.”

“And find a good partner who’s really talented with things that complement what you do. Succeeding is a combination of business and art.”

Olivia’s husband Joel, as we’ve pointed out, is an interlocking part of that equation. While Olivia creates and paints, Joel also creates, and administers, cajoles, and handles a significant portion of the business end. This includes Olivia’s transactions with publishers. Joel designs the books of Olivia’s work, and the books themselves are beautiful works of art and design. Joel is an expert on prepress and print production methods, and makes certain that the final printed art is the best possible. This quality extends to collateral work as well – prints, cards, and other items found on the popular eOlivia.com web site on the Internet and with retailers world-wide.

Interestingly, Olivia admits, “I have problems painting ‘outside my space.’ I wish I could paint machines; objects with engineering beauty, as opposed to the organic female figure. Here’s a funny example. Once, one of my paintings had a telephone in the center of the painting as a prop. It was one of those old telephones with the round dial. But to save my life, I could not draft, and then paint, a round dial! I tried, and nothing looked right. I agonized over that. I spent hours, it just dragged on, I couldn’t seem to paint it.” Eventually, she managed a satisfactory solution, but the memory of the process still stymies her.

“I hope that your readers enjoy painting; enjoy what they’re doing. To me, there’s a big payoff creatively, making your living as an artist. For me, it’s a ritual; it’s my drug. I work seven days a week. Sometimes Joel has to drag me out of it.”

Joel laughs and interjects “But that’s not as easy as it sounds.”

Widespread Popularity

Olivia, like many artists, may not know how popular her art is or how it’s become part of the common language of the pinup world. The writer of this article mentioned a recent motorcycle trip into north Georgia, where a small bike shop had a custom cycle on display. The bike’s rear fender displayed a perfectly-executed painting of one of Olivia’s pinups from her book *Let Them Eat Cheesecake*. Reflecting on this, Olivia said, “I’m thrilled! I’m glad that my work’s out there, and frankly I’m a little surprised to hear stories like that.” Our writer also anecdotally cited the number of custom paint shops that keep her art books not only as references but as tools for suggesting pinup approaches to prospective customers. She observed, “You know, I’m so happy that this art is meaningful to people, and you know what? I wish I could paint motorcycles!”

Elaborating, she added, “I’d love to work on cars, motorcycles, and tattoos. But there’s so much to learn. I love the sensual lines of some of the machines, and tattoo art is a fascinating and difficult world with its own masters and techniques that I find amazing.”

Bear in mind, though, that there are licensing issues. Like all commercial artists, Olivia runs a business. Fair use, or making single interpretations of a painting on metal or a tattoo is usually allowed under U.S. trademark law. But making multiples of an artwork, and selling those copies without licensing, is illegal. Olivia and Joel have found people illegally making and selling multiple prints, reproductions, and copies on everything from paper to ceramics. If you have a licensing or trademark question, they’re happy to discuss this with you. Please do them the courtesy of emailing to the address at the end of this article.

Bettie Page and Pinup Art

Bettie Page became popular, in an underground sense (see sidebar), in the 1950s and ‘60s. Her enduring popularity is a phenomenon that Olivia has long recognized.

She was one of *Playboy* magazine's first centerfolds, in January, 1955. Now in her 80s, Bettie continues to be a regular guest of Hugh Hefner at the Playboy Mansion. She calls Olivia regularly to check in and collaborate.

Olivia's first painting of Bettie Page was for a poster in 1980. The gallery of paintings accompanying this article takes you through the pages of Olivia's *Bettie Page*. Arguably some of her finest painting to date, the book delights with images highlighting Bettie's fame in popular culture. Note that some paintings have mature themes and the book is intended for adult audiences.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Bettie's life surfaced in popular literature. An unauthorized biography, *The Real Bettie Page: the Truth About the Queen of the Pinups* was written by *Style Weekly*'s associate editor, Richard Foster, in 1997. Bettie's authorized account of her life and times, which she co-authored, is called *Bettie Page: The Life of a Pin-Up Legend* (1996). The latter is out-of-print as of this writing, but copies are available used, usually for a premium.

A movie, *The Notorious Bettie Page*, was released in 2004. It is available on DVD for sale and rental. It stars Gretchen Mol as Bettie, and recounts many aspects of the star's life with some liberties taken by the motion picture scriptwriters and director.

Parting Words

Olivia stresses that she's still in the game, and doesn't plan to quit painting anytime soon. She says, "I have so many projects in my head, so many ideas that I still want to create and see through. I love what I do, and plan to keep doing it for a very long time."

We look forward to another profile of Olivia De Berardinis' work, and wish her well in her future contributions to the commercial art world and pinup art. She's inspired many artists and no doubt will continue to do so.

Resources

Olivia

Olivia's online presence is reachable on the Internet at **eOlivia.com**. You can purchase a wide range of books, posters, and other merchandise online. Phone orders are accepted as well.

Ozone Productions, Ltd.
P.O. Box 4153
Point Dume Station
Malibu, California, 90265
United States of America
(310) 457-8065

Olivia is on MySpace, at: **myspace.com/oliviadeberardinis**. During our interview, Olivia commented on linking with new friends via MySpace and is fascinated with the appeal that Bettie Page – as well as Olivia’s other art – is having with a whole new generation of fans.

Olivia is also available for custom consultation, such as portraits. Drop an email to her web site at eOlivia.com.

Bibliography

Olivia De Berardinis' books are available at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Borders, and other independent and local stores, and through eOlivia.com. The following titles are in print as of this writing:

Let Them Eat Cheesecake; The Art of Olivia, 1993.

Second Slice, The Art of Olivia, 1997.

American Geisha, The Art of Olivia, 2003.

Bettie Page, 2005.

Bettie Page

Bettie's Official Online Store is on the Internet at **BettiePage.com**. Shop, catch up on news, explore.

Joel Beren explains that sometime in the near future, a Bettie Page store will open in Las Vegas. He explains, "If you know Las Vegas, it's on the Strip. It's near the old Aladdin, which has become Planet Hollywood. It will have a lot of Bettie memorabilia, as well as an art gallery of Olivia's work."

Sidebar: Bettie Page

Some female "celebrities" remain in the fore of the American public imagination. Many don't. This year's "star" looks and sounds like last year's, who looks and sounds like all the other ones. It could be proof that cloning is here and real.

And why so many blondes? Maybe that started with Marilyn Monroe, who's been rhapsodized, painted, repackaged, and whose sad demise in her youth helped seal her legend.

But the baddest of the good isn't a formula-celebrity. She's a brunette, still living as of this writing. She was student from a Bible college in Tennessee named Bettie Page.

Bettie was adventurous enough in the days of a very closed-minded society to be photographed by competent amateur and semi-professional photographers, in different manners of fetish wear and eyebrow-raising activities, though the 1950s. As the technology for film processing and offset reproduction got better and cheaper in the twenty years following World War II, Bettie's images circulated with others of a similar vein to bring fetish subjects and (at the time) outrageous fantasies to "art magazines," "glamour studies," and other veiled publications. These small magazines circulated among collectors, while being reviled (along with comic books) as plots against the moral fiber of the United States in public hearings by Senator Estes Kefauver (also of Tennessee) and others. So unwittingly, Miss Page's images became free-speech broadsides for some and signs of a communist plot to poison our youth for others.

Ironically, many of Bettie's controversial photos are tame in comparison to the lingerie store display windows in shopping malls of the year 2006.

Time moves on, but Bettie's image keeps coming back – to everything from lunchboxes to biker jackets. She's an American muse. See the "Resources" section at the end of this article for references and more information.