

# Pam Carroll



## NOT A STILL LIFE

Pam Carroll must have been one heck of a room mother. All that creative energy focused on school art projects and classroom parties. The kids probably loved it even if they didn't fully appreciate the artistic talent in front of them. From the melodic voice to the easy smile to the twinkle in her eye, Pam Carroll was born to be a mom, and when her son came along, she happily packed up her easel and took a 16-year hiatus from painting. "I got pregnant and my whole life came to a halt and that was OK. It was what I wanted," she says with a smile. It's not as if she didn't do anything artistic over those years – there were plenty of what she calls "cottage art" projects, gift wrap design and several children's books – but for the most part, her time and energy were spent on her family.

Written by ERIN CLARK



...She has never painted from photographs. Like a set designer she creates her own miniature dramas just a few feet from her easel, and then in excruciating detail, she copies it. Every shadow, every nick, every nuance is transferred to the canvas.

She knew she would get back to painting eventually and she did. "As my son got older I started thinking about doing plein air painting, but I wasn't very good at it. So I just decided to concentrate on what I was good at." What she is good at is something called hyper-realism. She creates what are essentially still-life paintings but with such detail the image almost looks like a photograph. A decade has passed since she rekindled her love affair with painting and she sees the hard work starting to pay off. "It has taken ten years. You never actually 'get there' because it's always a journey, but I do feel like things are starting to happen for me."

But as any woman who has taken time off to raise a family will tell you, getting back into a profession is never easy. Carroll started on a couple of different fronts. She started painting trompe l'oeil murals in private homes. Trompe l'oeil (French for "trick the eye") is a painting technique involving optical illusion. The painting or mural literally tricks you into believing the object actually exists. A typical trompe l'oeil mural might be of a window, door or hallway that optically enlarges a room.

Carroll still employs the technique in some of her paintings - an object might be painted outside the frame, giving the illusion of it coming off the canvas. During the same period, the publisher of the Sleeping Bear Press, a small publishing house out of the Bay Area, also approached Carroll. He wanted her to illustrate children's books. "At first I was reluctant," she says. "Illustrating children's

books is almost a cliché, but it turned out to be one of the best experiences." In all, Pam illustrated six alphabet books. The most successful was *A is for America*. The timing was perfect in a bittersweet way. The book came out shortly before that fateful September day in 2001. It was doing well before 9-11, but sales really took off after that. The book even caught the attention of First Lady Laura Bush. "I'm told she keeps it on a bookshelf in her office," says Pam with obvious pride. To this day, Pam often goes into classrooms to read the book to kids. "I always take a bunch of little American flags with me. I get them waving the flags, feeling good about their country and having fun."



child's toy, but they are recreated with such obvious care and craftsmanship, it's as if you are transported to a warm summer afternoon right before making lemonade, or an autumn day when curling up

**IMAGES:** Opposite, "Brown Bag with Limes", 9 x 12 inches, oil on canvas. Above, "Onions", 12 x 24 inches. Center, "Tea for Two", oil on panel, 5 x 7 inches.



with a good book trumps work in a garden at season's end, or the lovely memory of a young child who is no longer little. Carroll's paintings are full of nostalgia – not the kind that takes you back to an era, but rather the journey back into personal memories stored carefully in the recesses of the heart.

Carroll says she has two sides to herself and to her painting, the silly side and the serious side. The latter produces traditional still life paintings in the tradition of Vermeer and American painters William Harnett and John Frederick Peto. It was these paintings that first attracted gallery owner Steve Hauk. He started selling Pam's work about six years ago and pretty much sells everything she gives him. Out of her silly side comes more whimsical pieces. She uses old-fashioned toys, dolls, blocks, and postcards – anything that gives the still

**IMAGES:** Top, "Cool Cats" oil on panel, 16 x 20 inches, right, "I'm Taking Off" oil on panel, 16 x 20 inches.



life an authentic feel – to stage her scene. She then carefully reconstructs it on canvas. She loves her objects, many of them worn and tired with age, but she believes it only makes them better. They are scattered throughout her small studio in the back of her Julia Morgan-designed Carmel bungalow. Morgan is best known for designing the Hearst Castle. Carroll's humble abode is a little less stately, but with a large picture window offering a gorgeous view of the Carmel Mission and the mountains beyond, Carroll has found her safe haven.

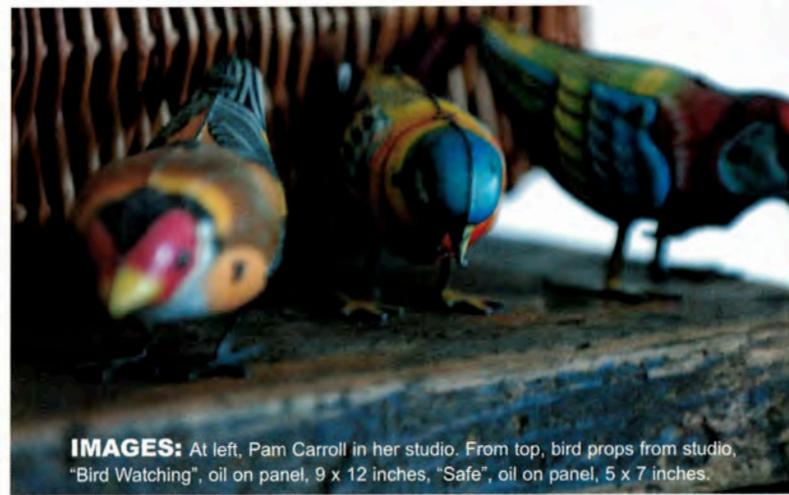
Sitting in her cozy living room, sharing a cup of coffee and a muffin, it's hard to believe Carroll's life has ever been anything but picture per-



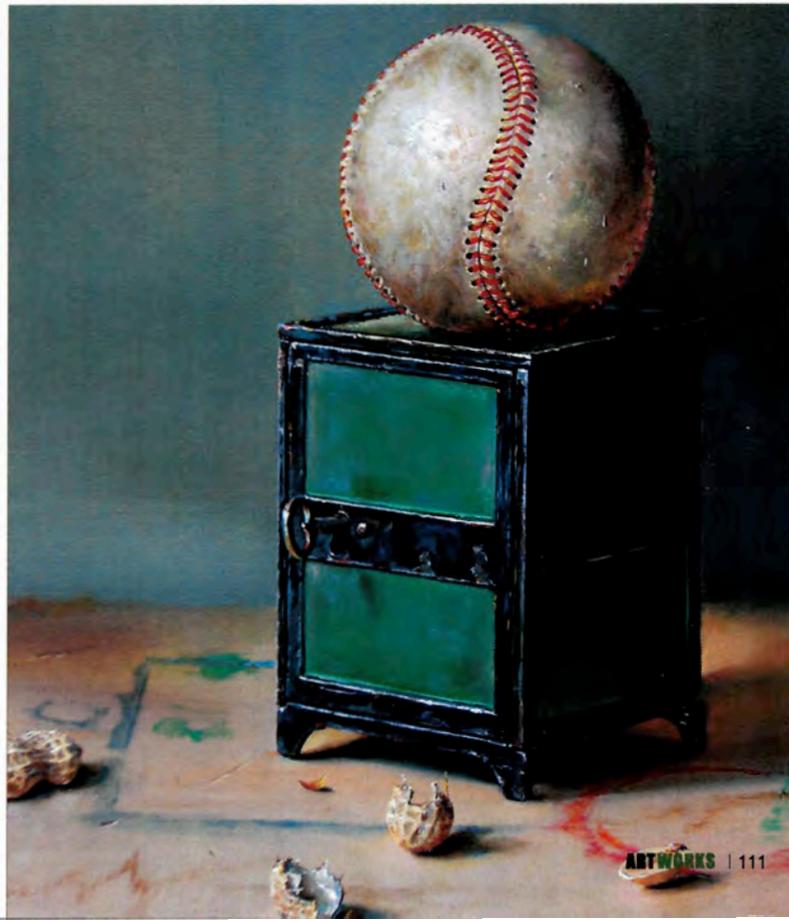
fect, but the truth is her childhood was not a happy time. She reluctantly talks about it but only in broad brushstrokes – her mom died when she was young, she and her sisters had to depend on each other, and she left when she was 18 years old. Those unhappy years led to a steely resolve to do it differently. She found the love of her life, her rock as she calls her husband Chris, and they've been married for almost 30 years. When her son, Dustin, was born she was determined to make sure he grew up happy. "Yes, I wanted to make sure my son had an idyllic childhood. It was important to me. Now I'm focused on my painting. I've never been more focused in my life, but art isn't all of who I am. As a matter of fact, I would like to be remembered for being a good mom and a good wife." No doubt she will be, but great painter will most assuredly be added to the list as well.



Pam Carroll's work was recently juried into the International Guild of Realism Group Show in Sante Fe. She was also part of an invitation-only show at the Klaudia Marr Gallery in Sante Fe. She is currently working on a one-woman show planned for May at the J. Howell Fine Art Gallery in Hillsburg, CA, and her work can always be found at Hawk Fine Arts in Pacific Grove.



**IMAGES:** At left, Pam Carroll in her studio. From top, bird props from studio, "Bird Watching", oil on panel, 9 x 12 inches, "Safe", oil on panel, 5 x 7 inches.



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