

EDUARDO CARRILLO

Leda and the Swan, 1996
oil on canvas, 51.5 x 56.5 in.



COURTESY ALISON CARRILLO

CHRISTINA WATERS

Invisible Music: Eduardo Carrillo

Memories of
the Artist I Knew

Even now, almost twenty years after his death, it's difficult to separate the man from his work. Both burned brightly, bursting with energy. Now only the paintings remain.

I was drawn to Eduardo Carrillo even before I realized that he was an extraordinary painter. Warm and genuinely comfortable in his skin, Ed personified the laid-back spirit of this coastal stretch of California. Although his ancestral roots were in Baja, he was quite willing to pepper his unpretentious persona with plenty of Los Angeles hipness when the occasion required.

The Ed I knew for fifteen years seemed incapable of angst. Maybe he had simply made wise choices at some early point in his journey, but he never seemed to be involved in anything he didn't enjoy. It was almost as though he knew his time here was limited, so he didn't waste much of it. His stance of unruffled amusement was as alluring as it was convincing. Asking around about him, I found out that he taught painting at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He had grown up in Los Angeles and gone to school with a few rock stars who remained tight friends.

Always ready with a smile or a story, Ed knew how to play. His teaching style, famously, relied as much on singing and playing the guitar to his students as in demonstrating the aesthetic ceremonies of pushing cool and warm colors against each other for maximum visual tension. That tension of visual moods, the opposing forces of blue against yellow for example, gave his artwork the illusion of inner movement. The muscular dynamic of Ed's figures, indeed the very compositions themselves, appeared to shimmer and dance. The man and the work were of a single vibrant piece, as I soon found out.

Born on April 8, 1937, in Los Angeles, Eduardo Carrillo took his MFA degree at UCLA before spending a year in Spain studying and painting in the Prado. Soon one thing led to another and, on fire with an unmistakable sense of his destiny, he and his young family moved to Ed's ancestral home in Baja California, where he founded a regional school of traditional arts at the central Baja mission pueblo of San Ignacio. The mission pueblo of San Ignacio would play an essential role in his life. That was where his mother was born and where he had spent many boyhood summers. It was also where, in a desert studio, he developed the intimate approach to light and landscape that

infused his work. His gifts as a painter and muralist won him many exhibitions in both Mexico and Los Angeles before he joined the faculty of UCSC in 1972. There, for the last twenty-five years of his life, he taught drawing, art history, ceramics, mural, fresco, and his specialties—oil and watercolor painting.

Into the Mystic

My memories of Ed always begin with his smile and his astonishing green eyes. The smile—a permanent expression of his approach to the world—sprang from the same source as his immense talent. Invariably drenched in light and color, quickened by sweetness and humor, that source seemed unquenchable. Even now that he's gone, it still seems so. Probably because Ed—however celebrated and loved—wore his gift so lightly. He never took it so seriously that it couldn't be suspended while he hung out with friends. Part trickster god, part transcultural poet, Ed made an impact simply by walking into a room. The gaze was part of it. The hats he loved to wear barely contained his thick black hair and even his bohemian mustache looked inevitable. Yet he never exploited his physical beauty. Frankly, he didn't have to. He had enough charisma in that smile alone. And he seemed, always, to sense something that no one else did. What this was, I was to find out when I visited his studio.

I kept running into this enormously attractive man at various social gatherings. It was the late eighties, the height of café society in Santa Cruz. Social events crystallized around political arguments and recreational drugs, and all of us involved in the arts of any kind wrapped up the work week either the Tea Cup (soon to be a casualty of the 1989 earthquake) or the Catalyst, where the Friday preconcert happy hour was a cult destination. Ed was there at the Catalyst every Friday afternoon, joined at the hip with his soul brother and fellow UCSC painting professor, Doyle Foreman. Whenever I came by to talk (flirt) with them, they were already deep into some private joke or invisible music. Maybe it was some secret language of guys who were more artists than egos (a rare breed to be sure). Maybe they were just more certain about what was important than the rest of us. But whatever it was, their camaraderie radiated an appealing gusto. It was a pleasure

just to watch them enjoying nothing in particular, over-hearing talk about their classes, the artistic problems they were engaged in, solving—or not solving. They would just as easily discuss the temperature of the beers they were drinking as the diagonals of Diebenkorn or some petroglyphs discovered on a desert field trip. Bohemian to the core, these two redefined full professorship.

How could I not be intrigued? People familiar with Ed's work found it as robust as the man himself. Catching a glimpse of his paintings in a faculty show, I was stunned by the flamboyance of his cast of characters, crafted partly from pre-Columbian Mexican mythology and politics and partly out of the landscapes of his imagination. Color ruled his work. The spirits of Siqueiros and Rivera haunted his style. Dreams, music, and mischievous geometries perfumed his hypnotic compositions.

Into the Studio

Finally an assignment to write about Ed for a local weekly newspaper—the occasion was very likely an upcoming exhibition but I no longer recall the details—gave me the excuse I had wanted to check out his Ben Lomond studio.

The studio was cool and spacious. Light spilled in from high windows along a sidewall, and a small potbelly stove sat in the middle next to a few funky over-stuffed chairs. It was a rare experience for me, probably for anyone, walking into the artistic center of a painter's creative life. Ed was polite enough not to laugh at how awestruck I must have appeared, but I remember his eyes crinkling with pleasure. In the spacious room there were a few small works in progress, on the floor, on the walls, one on an easel. As much as I saw, it only made me want to see more.

And he wanted to show me more—I'd like to think he wanted to impress me a bit. I knew he was going through some personal upheavals and I enjoyed soaking up his charisma. Ed asked if I had time to come up and visit the home of one of his collectors. I have all afternoon, Ed. So up through the woods we went. Redwood groves thickened as we parked outside a large rambling house of his friend and collector, Ron. The first order of business was to smoke a joint together—still a customary bonding ritual in late-afternoon 1980s Santa Cruz. Not that the astonishing impact of Ed's large-scale canvases needed any

psychedelic amplification. But it didn't hurt either. We joked, we laughed, we liked each other immediately. Thus primed, we were ready to begin the tour.

Before I returned to Santa Cruz as an adult, I had spent many years in Europe, where I was fortunate to visit the great museums and their legendary masterpieces. Van Gogh, da Vinci, Rembrandt, Degas—I had seen many masterpieces “in the flesh.” But seeing Eduardo Carrillo's paintings that afternoon in the redwoods was the first time I'd ever been in the presence of paintings of this scale in the company of the painter himself. The experience was as indelible as the artwork.

Almost life-size, the figures Ed had created from oil paint, canvas, and his fertile unconscious seemed to levitate with bravura—bravura as in El Greco's angularity spun through the *cangianti* of the baroque. The resonance of enormous canvases—all talking to each other in Ed's muscular language of sultry sexuality—made a lasting imprint.

I recall them as fashioned out of a skillful abrasion of warm against cool colors. The room seemed to bulge with the sheer force of the brilliant palette gleaming and burning with ochre and ultramarine. Ed had filled each one with what felt like three-dimensional light and heat, the grit and sweat of the mundane filtered through a folkloric scenarios. In this suite of large paintings, Ed wasn't out to trick the viewer so much as play with our eyes. The paintings, like the man, posed an invitation to dance, to dance to music both invisible and yet somehow familiar. Even if most of us had outgrown this sort of playful, primal relationship with the world, Ed still knew how to sing along to the invisible music of the sensory world. His paintings felt like a visual soundtrack to his huge enjoyment of being alive. On that day I became his fan forever.

The Color of Light

Colors for Ed existed in the service of light, transforming themselves magically before your very eyes into the light of an early afternoon in Baja. There the light is so intense that colors seem twice distilled, like good tequila, into something potent enough to reimagine what passes for reality. Magic realism. Before the term found currency in literature and filmmaking, Ed was robustly

inventing it. Driving earthy confrontations into mythic moments, painting the human into countless gods, Ed was making a convincing case for multiple realities—every single one of them capable of simultaneous laughter and destruction.

In *Reaching for Coatlique*—a lavish horizontal painting that Ed finished a few years after I met him—a roughly woven hammock stretches high above the land. Floating above the hammock are two figures, one representing the Aztec earth goddess, Coatlique—her arms open, her hair loosened—and the other Ed himself, reaching out for her, his body twisting gracefully in midair *contraposto*. This magical self-portrait announces the painter in a yearning quest to capture the earth goddess he has romanced throughout his life. (As I consider the painting today, I realize that Coatlique must have been based upon the golden-haired Alison, who would become his second wife.) The painting showed me a slice of Ed's dreams, visualized through his brilliant handling of light, scale, and sun-glazed color.

Ed loved music. He sang it, played it, danced to it, somehow always laughing, either with sheer high spirits or at his own eccentric movements. Even his paintings dance to invisible music. In his richest work, sexuality and cosmic symbolism share space with political heroes and the gods of Mesoamerica.

Lavishly proportioned nudes, circus performers, and singing rancheros fill canvases and murals dripping with humidity. Ed insisted upon impossible perspectives and a sense that space is full of curvaceous rhythms. The ingenious spatial viewpoints that show up in many of his paintings make even natural objects—trees, animals, and shadows—intertwine with incoherent perfection. They all sway to invisible music and Ed's skill lets us see its gravity-defying effects. His still life paintings suggest both the meditative qualities of Morandi and the fiery narratives of Kahlo. He understood red.

Armed with the instinctive immediacy of a curious child—fascinated with the colors, shapes, and rhythms of the sensory world—Ed probed and prodded the land, in Santa Cruz and in his beloved Baja, where he'd go each year to hear the stories of a favorite uncle, soak up the light of his grandmother's village, work on a never-ending building project, and open himself to inspiration.

Second Sight

Ed and I had been friends for several years when a whole new window opened on his life. Something had happened that he barely understood. An awakening, and it was all he talked about. It sprang from his rapidly evolving relationship with Alison Keeler. There had been a lot of love in Ed's life and Alison—lovely, mellow, simpatico—was its ultimate expression. Alison's incandescent blondeness made an immediate contrast to Ed's dark masculinity. They were gorgeous together. She began to show up with Ed at every party and art opening. She also showed up in an outpouring of new paintings he infused with her sunny beauty and his enormous passion for her. In his last years, Ed's world was unified by Alison's care and devotion. His paintings were saturated with their life together, their garden, the shrines and colorful artifacts of their home, the memories of their summers in Baja. His sense of play had acquired its ultimate destination.

Ed's work invariably, and idiosyncratically, embraces his New World roots. The light and dance of Mexico, the heat and hustle of Los Angeles, these influences made a dynamic partner for his classical training in European master techniques. In each of his works, he seemed busy becoming Eduardo Carrillo, a magic realist, an acrobat of dreams, a close observer of illumination. Ed transformed the most obvious details of his immediate surroundings—sexuality, oranges, wine bottles, guitars, lamps, cacti—into visual magic. His figures, always monumental and earthy, are more sculpted than painted, as in his middle-period *Two Brothers Fighting*, here we're almost able to step inside the boxing ring with two monumental sparring figures. They bear a fundamental sense of physicality that seems directly descended—or perhaps ascended—from muralist progenitors who inspired many of Ed's large-scale public artworks.

One of my favorites, a late painting, *Leda and the Swan*, underscores Ed's fascination with the luscious textures of flesh and his mastery of highlighting curves and angles of the body as if etched in neon. Set within a cool boudoir of deep blue green, the nude Leda/Alison, flesh glowing bronze, allows us a glimpse of her face in a hand mirror, straddling her seduction couch surrounded by woven curtains, potted palms, and a mandolin. The themes of the painter's deepest passions are all present in that painting. Music, nature, light, and desire.

Ed's artistic career was spent as much in playful experimentation as in sensitive observation—always pushing against canonic constraints in favor of bold celebration. Each painting is an invitation to share that invisible music to which his life was deeply attuned. It was impossible to know him without feeling lucky.

Ed painted like he lived—letting go and surrendering to the fullness of his moment in the universe. Trusting that moment completely. For all of us left in a world without Eduardo Carrillo, his moment was not nearly long enough.

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EDUARDO CARRILLO

Cabin in the Sky, 1966
oil on panels, 72 x 60 in.



COURTESY OF TONY BERLANT