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PAINTER AND TRAILBLAZING DRAG QUEEN TABBOO! ON LATE-LIFE ART WORLD SUCCESS: 'I'M HERE, BABY!'

by Deborah Vankin



The artist, Tabboo!, with one of his paintings at Karma gallery, where his first L.A. solo show opens on July 15. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

Tabboo! is having a moment. Again.

The multidisciplinary artist and performer, a.k.a. Stephen Tashjian, has been a staple of New York's East Village, where he's lived and worked for more than 40 years. As a trailblazing drag queen in the early '80s, Tabboo! performed as a singer and go-go dancer at the Pyramid Club, Mudd Club, Palladium and other legendary haunts of the time. He designed album covers for bands such as Deee-Lite and Book of Love, and created scores of fliers for friends' punk, glam rock and drag shows.

But it's only within the last five or so years, in his early 60s, that Tabboo! is finally receiving mainstream recognition as a traditional painter, a practice he's been honing all along, he says in a recent phone interview.

Tabboo!, now 64, had two concurrent exhibitions last year at New York's Karma gallery and Gordon Robichaux gallery, at which point his hometown paper called him one of the city's "best painters." The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film acquired Tabboo!'s archive of ephemera in 2017, including fliers for live shows dating back to the '80s. And L.A.'s Hammer Museum at UCLA and New York's Whitney Museum of American Art both acquired works by Tabboo! in 2020 and 2017, respectively.

Now Tabboo! will see his first Los Angeles solo exhibition open later

this week. “Nothing but blue skies from now on” opens July 15 at West Hollywood’s Karma.

“It’s fantastic. It’s about time,” Tabboo! says of the recent recognition.

“Like, where have you been all this time?! Like, from Diana Ross and the Supremes (he breaks into song): ‘I keep on waiting, anticipating. You can’t hurry love. No, you just have to wait. You know, success don’t come easy...’ (Speaking again): Everything in God’s time.”

Tabboo! is hardly an unknown artist. He put on puppet shows around New England when he was a teenager in the ’70s, creating all the costumes and painted backdrops. It earned him coverage in the Worcester Telegram at the time. And he’s shown work, in one capacity or another — at small galleries, art fairs, nightclubs, pop-up exhibitions — nearly every year since. But last year’s simultaneous showings, at significant New York galleries, catapulted him to a new level: “mainstream, over-the-top, big, huge, international art stuff,” he says. Which has been a game-changer for him.

“I’ve always been critically successful,” Tabboo! says. “And I’ve had financial successes along the way. In the mid-’90s I sold paintings to Elton John and Gianni Versace. But [last year’s] shows were, like — whoa. It was a huge turning point in my life. I’m not the same person, financially, anyway.”

Tabboo! used the newfound financial stability to create 22 new paintings, many of which will be on view in the upcoming L.A. exhibition. Whereas his recent New York shows were primarily cityscapes, the L.A. exhibition will feature landscape paintings. The works are deeply saturated with color and are grounded in realism with an abstract edge, as he describes them.

His “Lavender Garden” is backed by waves of purple paint tinged with aqua, as if the flowers and grasses were submerged under water. “Orion’s Belt” features a thin black mountain range dividing a midnight blue sky and tumultuous ocean surface, both speckled with pinpricks of white paint. In “California Sunset,” wispy palm tree silhouettes sway in the breeze against a fiery, burnt orange sky.

Tabboo!’s Los Angeles is conjured from film noir, he says, such as 1955’s “Rebel Without a Cause” and 1950’s “Sunset Boulevard.” On a trip to L.A. last year, he visited landmarks from those films such as the titular boulevard, the Hollywood sign and the Griffith Observatory. He took inspiration from the city’s street signs as well as its flora and fauna, particularly the sinewy palm trees and craggy succulents on street corners. Not to mention power lines.

“The wild thing about California, unlike New York City — maybe because it’s the desert — you have phone lines above ground on telephone poles. We don’t have that in New York. They’re underground. So it feels like a real phenomenon.”

In fact, much of Tabboo!’s depiction of Los Angeles came from “looking up.”

“When I painted New York City, I made mostly vertical paintings because I was doing skyscrapers. But I didn’t want to paint cars or people in L.A. These are horizontal landscapes of Los Angeles — the hills, the sky, the palm trees. It’s mostly about the sky. It’s a spiritual experience when I paint. It’s like meditation.”

Karma, which has two New York gallery spaces and a bookstore there, opened an L.A. outpost in September 2022. “Nothing but blue skies from now on” — along with an adjacent exhibition of work by nonagenarian sculptor Thaddeus Mosley — is the gallery’s sixth set of shows since debuting the L.A. space. Karma founder Brendan Dugan says he’s been especially excited to help shine an overdue spotlight on Tabboo!’s painting practice.

“He was always known as a performer and illustrator, but painting was happening concurrently,” Dugan says of Tabboo!. “Now people are seeing what a remarkable figure he is.”

Tabboo!, who identifies as an “Armenian New Yorker,” grew up in rural Massachusetts and studied painting at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. He was friends there with sculptor-photographer Jack Pierson and performance artist-photographer Mark Morrisroe. He later served as a muse for artists and photographers such as Ai Weiwei, David Armstrong, Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin, the latter putting him on the cover of her 1993 book, “The Other Side.”

Jean-Michel Basquiat was Tabboo!’s very first friend in New York City. The two met at White Columns, an alternative art space where Basquiat was performing that night in a hula skirt while playing the xylophone, Tabboo! says. “It was day one in New York. I was home!”

Tabboo! has never defined himself as just one type of artist; he’s also written plays, performed in glam rock, hardcore and cabaret bands, illustrated for magazines such as Sports Illustrated and Entertainment Weekly and designed window displays for Bloomingdale’s and Barneys New York.

When asked why he’s finally getting mainstream recognition as a painter, Tabboo! says it’s a combination of focusing primarily on painting at the moment and that the world is simply poised, now, to accept his inherent multidisciplinary nature. The art world, in particular, is no longer as determined to box artists into a singular defining label — “painter” or “singer.”

“Everything’s changed. The whole world has opened up,” he says. “Maybe because of the internet — the age of information — people are smartening up. Everyone isn’t just one thing anymore.”

The other thing that's changed? Performing in drag.

Tabboo! has made high-profile drag appearances over the years, including in the 1995 documentary "Wigstock: The Movie" and the 2019 HBO documentary "Wig." And he appeared, dressed as Cher, in an episode of Donald Trump's "Celebrity Apprentice," which Joan Rivers won in 2009. ("Luckily, I didn't run into Donald Trump. I went backstage to fix my makeup and missed him.") But these days, he only performs as a male.

"I've transitioned to my male self," Tabboo! says. "You had to perform in drag [in the past], if you wanted to perform. There was no outlet for gay men to publicly perform unless you were in the closet — and I'm not capable of that. So if you wanted to be yourself, you had to be in drag, especially in nightclubs. And only gay nightclubs."

As prominent as he's been as a performer — and despite depicting friends and other artists such as Keith Haring and RuPaul in his paintings — Tabboo! has always kept his painting process very private. He paints in his longtime East Village apartment, typically in the early morning, sprawled out on the floor bathed in dawn's golden light. He often pours paint upside down, so the drips travel upward. The resulting works, which he usually finishes in a day, have a "dreamy, beautiful, magical quality."

"I don't like anyone to see me painting. I paint in the nude, at 4 a.m.! It's a sacred, private thing," he says. "For me, when I paint, it's just me and the paint and the powers that be coming through me — and the three of us work together."

These days, Tabboo! has mostly retired from performing, he says. ("I'm too old to go to nightclubs. I'm asleep by 8 o'clock!") But he still posts short performative videos on his Instagram account.

And he paints on a daily basis. Individual works may come quickly, but "slow and steady" wins the race, Tabboo! says of success in the long run.

"If it comes too fast, too quickly, and you're young, it's not necessarily good," Tabboo! says. "I've been lucky. I've had ups and downs, but I keep going forward."

He didn't come up with the title of the L.A. exhibition — Karma did, taking the name from a 1926 Irving Berlin song — but Tabboo! says it couldn't be more appropriate.

"It wasn't always blue skies," he says of his artistic trajectory. "But now, I'm in like Flynn. You cannot deny me. I'm in museum collections, I'm in major personal collections. I'm here, baby, on a huge international [scale]. I'm a master of my craft. And it's nothing but blue skies from now on."