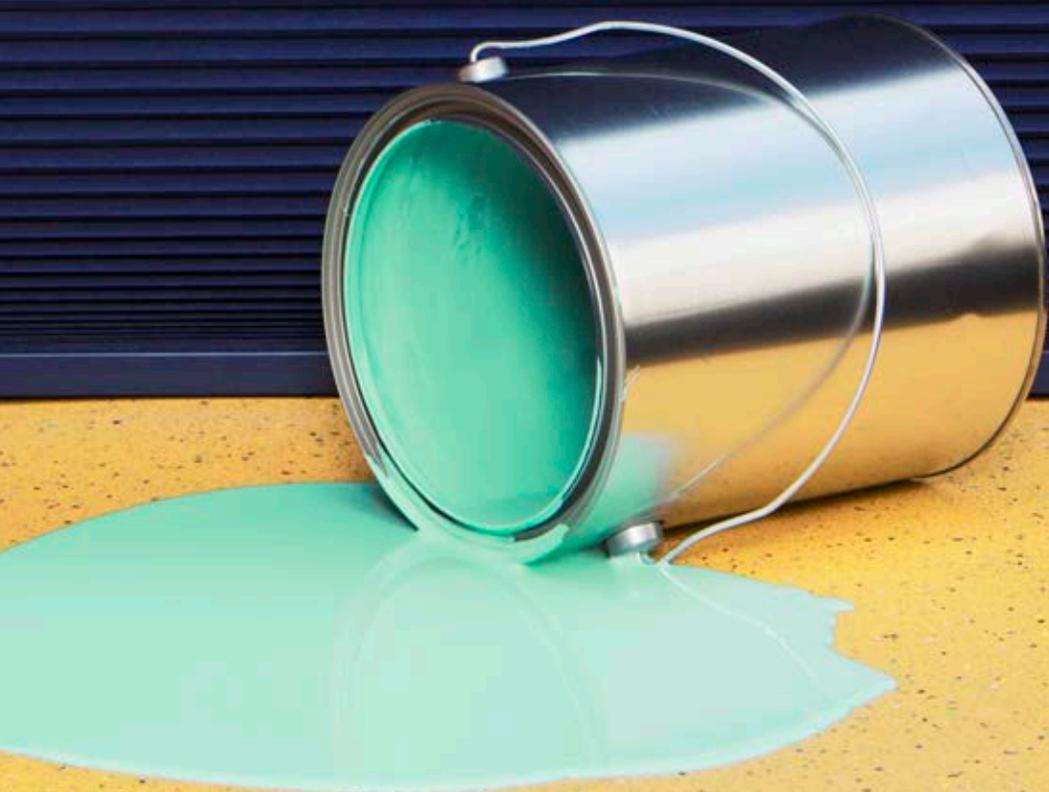


02

## CAVIAR QUARTERLY

FEATURING:

*TJ Miller, Jason Woliner,  
So Yoon Lym, Ramona Rosales,  
Nick Walker, Franck Bohbot*



New Jersey-based painter  
**SO YOON LYM**  
has found  
international recognition  
with her series

## ***THE DREAMTIME***

Inspired by  
the hairstyles of  
students at the  
inner-city high school  
where she teaches,  
LYM's paintings are  
an exploration of  
ritual, craft, and  
the interconnectedness  
of cultural nomads



*Diosnedy*



*Angel*



*William*



Mario

## How did *The Dreamtime* series come about? What about cornrows initially drew your attention?

In April 2007, I was invited to participate in a series of group art exhibitions at the Passaic County Community College Art Galleries in Paterson, New Jersey. This exhibition series was scheduled for the 2007–2008 academic year, and was to showcase Paterson Public School Art Educators who also made their own artwork. I wanted to paint a special series that was inspired by my work as an art educator for the seven years up until 2007 at John F. Kennedy High School, where I was teaching.

I started looking at the hundreds of photos of different cornrow hairstyles on various students that I had taken between 2001 and 2007. I have always been interested in fashion, style, and design, so I instantly noticed students' fashions and hairstyles. I came to understand that many of the male students with cornrow hairstyles were emulating their sports and music idols that were also wearing cornrow hair braids at that time, like Allen Iverson, Carmelo Anthony, Snoop Dog, and Coolio.

In the summer of 2007, I painted ten 14 x 17" acrylic-on-paper paintings using selected reference photographs. Upon painting these ten acrylic on paper cornrow hair paintings, I realized that I had a potentially special painting series if I could make them larger in scale, as well as more detailed and precise as representations of hair, much in the way that the actual cornrow hair braid patterns are unique, detailed, and precise.

This smaller, first incarnation of cornrow hair paintings, that would later become *The Dreamtime*, were painted fairly quickly with broad gestural paint strokes. Each of the larger 22 x 30", acrylic-on-paper paintings in *The Dreamtime* took at least a month to paint, if not longer. For me, these were very labor-intensive paintings that took an inordinate amount of time, as well as mental and physical discipline which involved ten-hour stretches of non-stop painting to build the layers of individual hair strands. I thought for many months about a series title and ideology that would make these paintings more than just painted images of cornrow hair braids. I decided on calling this painting series *The Dreamtime*.



Headlights in the Night



Here to There

**It seems that much of your work is series-based; wherein you establish a set of rules and explore variations within these rules, e.g; the from the top angle of *The Dreamtime* or the headlights in the dark of *Headlights and Lights*. Is placing constraints on yourself an important part of your process?**

The angle of *The Dreamtime*, and the reasons behind positioning the heads from above and from behind, had a lot to do with the legality of photographing students in a public school environment without parental permission. Ultimately, I decided that the hair and braid patterns were best showcased and highlighted from above and from behind. I also felt that these hair and braid paintings could be represented in the most abstract and contemporary way by focusing on the cornrow hair patterns from non-traditional vantage points and obscuring the faces. *The Dreamtime* paintings are about a communal and time-based hairstyle, rather than about individual personalities or identities. Although, I recognize that individual choices made the wearer choose his or her particular cornrow hairstyle.

I think with any series or project there has to be a certain set of rules, rationale, or conceptual idea behind the presentation. The *Headlights and Lights* paintings were painted during a time period in my life where I was doing a lot of nighttime driving and feeling a great deal of uncertainty about my personal and professional life direction. I would like to think that this translated into material form through this particular painting series, without going into too much explanation of structural form, composition and painting approach.

**In the past, you have said that the title of *The Dreamtime* is based on the aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime. How do you see the series relating to this?**

In pre-colonial, Aboriginal Australia, The Dreamtime was the time period that the Aborigines used to explain their life existence. In choosing a title for this cornrow painting series, I thought about how most of my students were either African American or Latino. Most of my Latino students were recent immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Peru, Mexico, or Puerto Rico. If my students were African American their ancestors were, for the most part, from Africa, and brought to the United States as slaves. In this way, we all are transplanted and nomadic people making a living, however way we came to America.

I know that cornrow hair braiding, as a ritual and symbol, is very charged, especially with this country's history of slavery. But at the same time, I feel that interest in hair and hairstyles has a universal appeal that transcends time, place, and situational history. In my mind, to view and love something is to also become part of that which one loves and views. In this way, I think we all become part of new and overlapping storylines and histories.

In choosing a time period that had similarities to the United States, like Australia, and in making reference to a time period of native peoples, I was hoping to make this series representative of nomadic people, how everyone becomes connected to a new place and land through rituals, whether in daily living or daily work. Sometimes to view from the outside, one can see more clearly without the bias of affiliation or allegiance that can take shape, form, or character in any other embodiment. In this regard, the title *The Dreamtime* was so very important to me in referencing the Australian aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime or the Dreaming, because this time period embodied spirituality, nature, and existential meaning. It is a way of life that I think most people would understand and appreciate the essence of, in the truest and purest form, without injection of personal stories and identities, which are often clouded with preconceived ideas of not just the *other*, but also of our own selves and lives.

The interest in the cornrow hair braid paintings and my having spent time painting this series makes me feel connected to my students with whom I have worked with for the past decade. My life prior to working in Paterson was far removed, but deeply embedded still in the idealized dreams that I had as high school teenager, wondering what would become of my life as I lived in a neighboring North New Jersey suburban town less than five minutes from the city of Paterson, never expecting to ever find myself working in and finding meaning and purpose in this city for 12 years.

*The Dreamtime* series was the most difficult painting series that I have ever worked on both technically and psychologically. With all the doubts, fears, insecurities, and financial difficulties in painting and promoting this series, I found elusive happiness just from the perseverance of having a vision for a new painting series that I knew I wanted to and had to paint, but was anxious simply because I couldn't visualize the end result of what the first few paintings would look like when completed as I was working on a few paintings concurrently. And then, I experienced another wave of uncertainty in following through with this vision of how I wanted to promote and present *The Dreamtime* paintings, as I kept pushing to show this series in many solo and group exhibition venues for three years, even in the face of much rejection and disappointment.

**It's surprising to me that you have found such inspiration in Paterson. What is it about this small post-industrial city that interests you so deeply? Why have you felt the need to document so many aspects of it?**

Paterson is the third largest city in New Jersey and is like many other urban American post-industrial cities, but with the unique distinction of being the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution. Everyone knows about the celebrations and joys in other peoples' lives, but the daily struggle just to get by and make it to the next day is what interests me. I think a hairstyle can be that one thing that makes one's life feel like it is a bit more special, and help make the day go by smoother and feel nicer. I suppose my works are documentations, as the imagery is relevant to Paterson, but also perhaps to any other urban, post-industrial American city. These are the cities that immigrants, like myself first move to and to start life anew as Americans.

Different artists have documented Paterson over the years. I think my favorite artist to have documented Paterson is William Carlos Williams, because he wasn't originally from Paterson, nor did he live there, and his primary day job was as a physician, like my father. My father wasn't a poet, but I like that William Carlos Williams, like myself, had a day job, but continued to write poetry throughout his life. In doing so, he chose Paterson as a way to find meaning and direction in his writing. He chose to find inspiration from local life, and from the colloquial American language of his time. Williams was a poet of the streets who wanted to find meaning through a uniquely American and modern language and style.

A big part of my interest in Paterson had to do with the circumstances in life that brought me to Paterson. When I was a teenager I was always dreaming and wanting to go and travel somewhere else. I did a bit of travelling here and there in my 20's and 30's, but in the end I always looked forward to coming back home to northern New Jersey.



*Hector*



*Jhonathan*



*Quay*



*Jonathan*

**Do you see the pieces as documentation of a craft? Or are you recontextualizing the craft by turning them into paintings rather than simply photographing the braids?**

Yes, the paintings are a documentation of the craft that is cornrow hair braiding. Composition, technique, medium, scale, and style of any painting recontextualizes subject matter because any chosen medium in the visual arts or performing arts is in and of itself a craft. I think the paintings are again recontextualized, having been painted by someone who would be considered an outsider to this hairstyle and culture from surface appearances. And then they are further recontextualized, depending on the viewer's life and art viewpoints.

**How do your works relate to Place? Are you inspired to create based on where you are? Would you consider your art to have an anthropological aspect?**

I think all works of art or creation become anthropological, in the sense that all works of creation reflect the maker, the audience, the subject matter, place and time, and reference points to and from the creator being.

**Has the success of *The Dreamtime* affected the way you create art? Do you feel pressured to create more works in the same vein to continue riding the critical wave of this series?**

Technology played a huge role in the progression of my work as an artist in the last decade. Prior to 1999, I was very, very mindful about taking pictures with my 35mm camera and then getting them processed, which was an expensive endeavor. I would not have even started taking so many pictures of cornrow patterns in 2001, were it not for the advent of the digital camera and the ease in which to print out photos on one's own computer printer.

One thing I've learned from painting this series is that the work is one thing, and then there is a whole other world of promotion. I came to the conclusion that one solo show and a few public viewings were not adequate ways of showing one's artwork. The success of *The Dreamtime* was really in the online transference of information and with my relentless and obsessive continuation of submitting these works for different group and solo exhibition viewings all over the country and world. According to my accountant though, I am not successful if I don't sell any paintings. And part of me is starting to feel that way, as I have spent so much money on framing, delivery of works for exhibitions, getting all my works archived, having professional graphic designers maintain my website, and continuing to spend more time and more money showing these works. I am currently working on a store site link to my artist website, where I hope to be able to sell my artwork as Archival Pigment Prints. I think the relative interest in *The Dreamtime* made me realize that maybe I could make some sort of a living selling my artwork? People don't understand how much money goes into making and showing art. In the end, the artist has to see the making and showing of his or her art as a labor of love in order to keep motivated.

I don't feel pressured to create more works in the same vein. One can never predict what will be of interest to a viewer, and that shouldn't be the artist's primary goal, but a by-product of an endeavor or project. I have also come to recognize that a certain amount of politics and chance comes into play with financial and critical success as an artist. I think an aspect of *the cult of personality* also comes into play. I don't know if I really want to be out there as a *personality*. I love my privacy and my quiet and alone time, so in this regard, I am ambivalent about what success means. I would love the success part where my finances improve though. It would be nice to one day have the freedom to create without financial barriers. But, at the same time, I think that having boundaries and barriers can be a good thing, because these force you to be resourceful and perhaps more creative in finding and accepting alternate routes.

For so many people to have seen my paintings, whether online, in printed form, or in person is as good as I can imagine what success of a series is. In the larger scope of the art world at large success would be defined by sales, gallery affiliation, prestigious art press and publicity, and prestigious awards won. *The Dreamtime* would not be considered successful in any of these art world aspects. I think sometimes we have to redefine what success means to our own individual lives, because not everyone is going to be successful in the same way.



*Juan*