

Upland artist uses work to fight for social change



Artist Rebecca Ustrell (Photo by Yulissa Mendoza)

By **PATRICK BRIEN** | |

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When Rebecca Ustrell said she has always been interested in some form of art, she meant it.

The Upland resident went on to describe playing the violin from second to sixth grade, the cello from seventh to eleventh grade, being fascinated by live opera and symphony broadcasts on PBS and loving Bob Ross's "The Joy of Painting." She got her first oil paint set when she was in third grade.

As Ustrell entered her teens, her artistic interests moved from animals and video game characters to what she called “more brooding subjects.”

“I began to dabble in poetry and the subject of the self,” she said. “To this day, most of my artwork is autobiographical. I now explore human sexuality and the body’s relationship with nature throughout my illustrations.”



“Psychedelic Furs,” a 2018 India ink on paper by Upland artist Rebecca Ustrell. (Photo provided by Rebecca Ustrell)

Born in Pomona, the 30-year-old Ustrell grew up moving around the inland region.

“I come from a family of little means, which meant we would move where work or family took us,” she said.

After graduating from Upland High School, Ustrell began attending Chaffey College where she has taken several studio art classes over the years. She said that most of her artistic skills are self-taught, however. Other skills in the administrative arena started to develop as Ustrell worked as an event coordinator and

fundraiser for a Claremont non-profit organization which supported foster children.

“In that career I gained experience managing high-level donors and large-scale events, and also had experience creating smaller gift drives throughout the year,” she said. “My absolute favorite was an art supply drive for children in group homes. Since my own upbringing was less than picturesque, I always placed high value on access to the arts in order to heal, especially in children.”

While working in Claremont, Ustrell also volunteered as the coordinator for the Claremont Art Walk Pop-Up Gallery for two years. She also did journalistic work for Cali Focus Magazine.

“Through that connection I met folks in radio, and even had an opportunity to conduct live recording and interview of Kamala Harris for KVCR,” she said.

Ustrell's time as a volunteer for the Claremont Art Walk made her want to continue working with the local arts community, so she contacted some friends and began planning an independent pop-up of her own which would focus on print media.

"I find print material to be the perfect mobile gallery," she said. "As someone who had little access to formal galleries and museums growing up, magazines and books were often the only exposure to the arts I had."

Ustrell paired her experience with layout design and her knowledge of local art in creating "CURIOUS." The event was such a success that Ustrell formed Curious Publishing, which has gone on to print eight issues of "CURIOUS" in two volumes. Their biggest release to date was the Latinx volume, which had its release party at the Riverside Art Museum in March. They have also picked up a second title, ABYME, an independent arts magazine which had ceased production.

"Being a fan of the zine, I reached out to its original creator and asked if could continue the mag," said Ustrell.

In addition to their own titles, they specialize in publishing the work of local artists in the form of independent art books. They recently branched out into audio, working with local musician Wundr. in releasing "Collection No. 1" on cassette. The group also hosts "5th Street Zinefest," a biannual event during Redlands Art Walk.

"We have created dozens of projects since our inception only two years ago and we're proud to be able to provide opportunities for artists to gain exposure and get paid," said Ustrell.

In terms of her own writing, Ustrell has published "Imperfect Blue" and "Lonely Men," two chapbooks, or small books, exploring lost love. As an artist, her favorite show has been her solo exhibit "Curious Pleasure" at the Garner House. She is currently developing a deck of tarot cards, which marry illustrations from the classic Rider-Waite tarot deck, first published in 1909, with current social issues.

“We are living in historic times of change where artists are using their power to uplift the community and educate each other of deeper social issues prevalent in our own communities,” she said. “I think it’s so important to acknowledge the role that artists have in bringing positive change.”

For information: www.rebeccaustrell.com or [@curiouspublishing](https://www.instagram.com/curiouspublishing) on Instagram.

Patrick Brien is executive director of the [Riverside Arts Council](#).

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