

The Maker

Artist Sas Colby

by Christine Hemp



photo by Kate Cameron

Piero Della Francesca, *Particolare* 16 x 60 acrylic on canvas 2003, is a good example of Sas's work and of her view of art linked to sensual pleasure. The quotes used in the paintings are from Peter Schjeldahl, art reviewer, and were published in the *New Yorker* magazine.

When an artist's life and work entwine seamlessly, it's like watching a hummingbird building its sculptural nest: Not only is the bird creating beauty, but every flickering feather reflects the world's iridescence. Artist, teacher, traveler, and aesthetic adventurer Sas Colby is just such a creature. As one of her students comments, "I learn just by *being* with Sas! She has changed my life."

I met Sas Colby in the early 1990s at a dinner party in Taos, New Mexico. Her all-encompassing smile lit her face, and her short blond hair seemed something of a halo, reflecting her natural warmth. The party faded into the background as Sas's and my exchange swooped from poets to artists, marriage to lovers, architecture to actors, fashion to novels. That was twenty years ago; the conversation hasn't stopped.

Not long after that party, Sas had invited me to dinner at the Southwestern-style *casita* (small house) she rented. She had whipped up a carrot-ginger soup, served with crostini, that I emptied in a flash. "Oh, you love to eat," she'd exclaimed, "good!" She hopped

up to fetch my bowl and then served me another huge helping, after which she brought us plates of arugula salad speared with chervil and goat cheese. The house, with a kiva (beehive) fireplace, soft pink adobe walls, and Mexican tile floors, was not decorated so much as *embellished*. Yes, there was a painting of an earlier era Taos cowboy, and a Navajo blanket, but her modernist taste—such as a painting by her artist friend, the late William Ridenhour—gave the place a daring freshness. Draped over a chair were several yards of gold satin she'd recently purchased. "Oh! I just couldn't resist it!" she'd said, dish-ing up peach cobbler and handing me a glass of ginger tea. On her coffee table lay a *Vanity Fair* as well as the current issue of *The New Yorker*. I was enchanted.

Not only had I found a new friend, but someone in the wilds of New Mexico with whom I could talk about the world at large. (She still keeps me abreast of contemporary culture. During a recent phone conversation, she'd chided, "What? You don't know Justin Bieber? Keep up, Christine, keep up!") In that Taos home, above the sofa, was one of her own

mixed-media paintings—a large collage (42" x 35") of painted cardboard and mushroom prints on a blue background, with embossed plastic letters glued to the surface that spelled the words, Spring Summer Winter Fall.

The collage is somewhat indicative of Sas's entire body of work, in that fabric and words are interlaced through much of it, including in her early textile art, her collages, assemblages, and most strikingly in her artist books. Sas's work stands alone, says Taos art dealer and curator Judith Kendall, who is the former owner and director of the Fenix Gallery. "She came into my gallery one quiet afternoon asking if she could show me work. To my amazement what unfolded was a series of canvas books, painted in acrylic, each exploring a different aspect of life's journey," Judith recalls. Sas's books had titles, such as *Four Unfinished Chapters*, *Eternity*, and *Psychic Research*, Judith says. "Unlike the craft version of artist books with which I was familiar, I was stunned by her originality, integrity, and risk-taking. Those who dare to push boundaries and speak with their own voice capture my heart and respect. Sas is

one of those artists."

Sas was born in 1939 in Massachusetts. She studied at Rhode Island School of Design, got married and had two children, and moved frequently with her military-pilot husband, eventually settling in Connecticut. After getting divorced in 1975, she moved to San Francisco's Bay Area, where she has lived since—except for the seven-year hiatus in Taos, during which we first met. Her move to the West liberated her, Sas says, not only from Eastern convention, but from artistic expectations. In 1980, in Berkeley, California, for example, she and performance artist Paul Cotton had created a live "re-vision" of Edouard Manet's 1862 painting, "Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe," ("The Luncheon on the Grass,") in which a female nude and a scantily-clad female bather picnic with two fully dressed men. Sas and Paul, along with another couple, reenacted the scene in the sculpture garden at the Berkeley Art Museum. "But Sas leveled the playing field with true feminist perspective," Paul recalls, "by bringing Manet's imagery up to date. Sas—a voluptuous nude—took off my clothes as well!"

California is also where Sas first met other artists who were exploring books. "Sas was an early adapter of the artist book form," says Kathleen Walkup, who is a professor of book art and the director of the book art program at San Francisco's Mills College. "I distinctly remember her early books," Kathleen says. They included pages of photographs taken with a Brownie camera, "memorable because they reflect her fearlessness in revealing herself." The Brownie, a simple, squarish, bakelite camera made by Eastman Kodak, was vastly popular in the 1950s and '60s. It introduced the whole notion of the "snapshot." Sas called it "a fetishistic object, a little black cyclops." Sas painted pictures of what the camera saw, but also pictures of the camera itself. "There was also a lot of fabric in her work, which other feminists were doing in the 1970s, like Miriam Shapiro," Kathleen continues, "but Sas was doing it in her own way. Her work is infused with exuberance. Those were pictures of her life."

Kathleen remembers one book, called *I Moved, 806*, that "was made of enlarged Brownie photographs with collaged elements and hand-written text." What was extraordinary, says Kathleen, is that "the theme addressed her recent move to Oakland, but it was a fully comprehensive use of materials." Kathleen notes, "Sas continues to bring to this field an incredibly strong combination of what she calls *art thinking* and a fundamental, visceral understanding of materiality. She is a thinker, yes, but she is really a maker."

Making—art, meals, workshops, and friends,

as well as two beautiful, talented daughters—is Sas's life work. Earlier this year, I visited her at her home in Berkeley to see what she was up to. Visiting Sas means eating well, talking well, and seeing intensely. Her California home has a spaciousness similar to what she had created in her home in Taos. She had inherited the California-style Craftsman house from her second husband, John Coleman, who died in 1998. She transformed her grief by renovating and painting the rooms in pale powdery blues, bold greens, and rabbit-ear pink. A scarlet Eames chair sits next to an overstuffed sofa. *Decoded*, (Spiegel and Grau, 2010,) a memoir by rapper Jay-Z, lies open on the kitchen counter near a copy of *W* magazine and a collection of poems by sixth-century Chinese poet, Li Po.

"Come to the studio," Sas tells me when I arrive, as she makes a beeline outside, with her Yorkshire terrier, Boris, close at her heels. She leads me through her little garden where hellebores and euphorbia bloom next to kale and parsley. In her new, sky-blue studio, which is tucked into the corner of her tiny lot, Sas pulls out her most recent project. I gaze around at the walls, where multiple gold and black paintings of the Madonna and of Buddhas—inspired by recent trips to Burma, Italy, and Thailand—watch over her worktable. A new "Teabag" series is spread out on another counter, the dry teabags having been glued together to create a swath of fabric. On the crinkly surface of this material, Sas has transferred images of swishy dresses. But what she really wants to show me is her "Big Project."

"Here, have a look," she says, and scoots her stool over to join me at the table. She opens a 7 x 9 inch mock-up book called "World of Books." On its cover is a photograph of one of her small assemblages—a tiny globe of the earth glued to a miniature leather-bound book. Sas had been talking about this book for months. Her project was snapped up on the online fundraising platform Kickstarter.com, and as a result she was able to raise enough funds to complete her vision. Sas's "World of Books" was originally conceived for the Al-Mutannabi Street Coalition, an international effort founded by the Jaffe Center for Book Arts. The book project will commemorate the 2007 bombing of Al-Mutannabi, the bookseller's street in Baghdad that has thrived as such for centuries. Some two hundred and sixty book artists, Sas among them, are invited to create a book to honor intellectual freedom and the power of the printed word. Each artist is donating three one-of-a-kind books, and one complete set will be donated to the Iraqi National Library. Beginning in 2013, until 2015, the books will be in a traveling exhibition that will circulate through major cities around the world.

"I was devastated by what the war has brought to that culture," Sas says, "But I can't stop a war. So instead I made a positive statement about freedom of expression. My book is not really about Baghdad at all; people's eyes glaze over when something's too political." Sas settles on the stool, her feet barely touching the floor. "So I invited friends and artists of all kinds simply to send me a photograph of their bookshelves. That's it. For a year, these images—" she points to the finished book—"kept popping into my inbox." She flips to a photo of a bookshelf from Australia, and then to one from Ireland, in which a book, entitled *101 Dog Tricks*, can be seen on the shelves.

"At first I was concerned it wouldn't be exciting enough," Sas says, and lays her hand on a photo from Azerbaijan that was taken with a cell phone. "It wasn't until the end—when I printed them all and saw what I had to work with—that I realized my original idea held up," she says. "It was the power of the accumulated images that spoke to me. Shelf, after shelf, after shelf of books! There is a kind of welling up, a fondness, a deep love for books in these pictures." The books in the images speak volumes: a biography of the late French-American artist Louise Bourgeois; a row of red spines with gilded Arabic script; an Iraqi writer's notebooks, nearly tumbling off of a shelf. "Think about it: A book of bookshelves!" Sas laughs, and gently closes the book.

Words have always played a significant role in Sas's work, initially in terms of composition, then later in more complexity. Perhaps she was influenced by her friendship in the 1970s with the French author Anaïs Nin, known for her erotica and for her journals, which made her a feminist icon of the 1960s. But Sas has her own passion for reading and literature. During dinner, Sas and I recall how our own collaborative friendship has influenced each of our art forms. "It wasn't until I met you in Taos and took one of your poetry classes that I really began to take on the structure of metaphor in a visceral way," she says, laying out a dish of homemade chutney and relish. When Sas first invited me, in the early 1990s, to teach at her annual art-making workshop at the Mabel Dodge Luhan House in Taos, I was struck by her clear intention and supreme teaching skills. My poem-writing instruction seemed to flow perfectly with her visual exercises.

That teaching experience began a long, fruitful cross-pollination between us. Among other collective efforts, we designed a limited-edition, hand-sewn volume of my poems, entitled *Seeing Red*, with her art on the cover—a photo of one of her assemblages, "Apple Head," a figure with an



In Our Own Image 18 x 24 black gesso and gold leaf oil on oil painted museum board 2005-2006, shows various Buddhas and Madonnas inspired from art history and travel sources.



photo by Philip Kagan

Poet's Tool Box 3 1/4 x 9 mixed media assemblage 1994



photo courtesy Sas Colby

These mixed-media and acrylic-painted canvas books were created during Sas's time in Taos, New Mexico.

apple for a head. "We also team-taught at workshops we created together, including one called, "Object as Metaphor," at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine, and another called, "The Artful Traveler," in Soreze, France. (Sas's organizational prowess is matched only by her ability to attract students.)

"Because of poetry I learned how to say things," Sas says, as she sips from a glass of shiraz. "It was seminal. There is no codified way to talk about artist books, and poetry taught me how to do that. I think one has to have an appreciation of language and metaphor in order to talk about an art form, which plays on literary conventions. Understanding metaphor was a real turning point in my teaching—and in all my visual work."

Fran Meneley, a Colorado-based artist and teacher who has taken several Sas Colby workshops, says, "I will always keep studying with Sas. Not only because she's a talented artist, but she has the ability to bring people together, to create a safe place for learning, way beyond your comfort zone." Fran mentions the unconventional materials Sas offers: not only paint, but mud and sticks. In one workshop, Fran says, "Sas gave us a big piece of brown paper and said, 'Draw a dragon! You have five minutes!' Being a planner, I trembled. But it was remarkable. I started flinging mud. My dragon looked like a goat, but I loved it. It released me from how I usually work."

Lois Graessle, a writer from London, England, has been attending Sas's annual workshops

in both Majorca and Taos for eleven years. Lois says she was hesitant and self-naysaying, "can't do, hopeless, terrible," at first. "But Sas reminded me she ran art classes not art therapy, so I should just get on with it," Lois says. "My first artist book was called, *Googling Panic*." Sas's dealer, Judith Kendall, agrees with Sas's students, and says that Sas's teaching is a gift—"to be able to create with one's own voice and also motivate and influence others through teaching is exceptional. Sas has both. There is so much joy around her. Few have such generosity of spirit."

When Sas and I were teaching at Haystack, each instructor gave a presentation to the community. Instead of the usual, often tedious, chronology of work that many visual artists share, Sas had strung together a series of slides that were about imagery and influence instead of illustration or self-promotion. One in particular has stayed with me: a photograph she'd taken of a Berkeley telephone pole punctured with rusty staples, bite-sized remnants of paper flyers that once announced concerts and garage sales. The light, the texture of the staples, and the layered scraps of colored paper, were framed in such a way it could easily have been an abstract painting.

Sas is not only a thinker and a maker, she is also a framer—of beauty, of possibility, of surprise. "I'm coming from a more seasoned place now," she tells me. "It does take a lifetime to be confident. And I'm not finished yet." ❖

Go to www.sascolby.com to find out more about Sas Colby, and to view some of her art and her workshop schedule. Go to www.almutanabbistreetstartshere-boston.com/about.html to find out more about the upcoming traveling book exhibit.

Poet and art writer Christine Hemp has been featured on National Public Radio's Morning Edition, reading her commentary and poetry. A new book of her poems, *That Fall*, was chosen for the 2011 New Women's Voices Series at Finishing Line Press. A poem of hers is in the cosmos on a NASA mission to monitor the prenatal activity of stars. She is a personal coach as well as an award-winning writing instructor. She teaches nonfiction and poetry at the University of Iowa Summer Writing Festival, and she also works with corporations, government agencies, and universities using poetry and art to span seemingly impossible communication chasms. Her radio program, "The Hempsonian Institute of Higher Yearning," airs on public radio and online. She lives in Port Townsend, Washington. For more information go to www.christinehemp.com.



photo courtesy Sas Colby