

# Portraits of an Artist: Pilar Mehlis

BY LEIA SIN, THE PROVINCE MAY 8, 2011 COMMENTS (1)

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Painter Pilar Mehlis at work in her studio.

**Photograph by:** Jeremy van Nieuwkerk, Submitted photo

Painter Pilar Mehlis loves treading the line between fantasy and realism, looking to the magical world to shed light on the human one.

Born in New York and raised in La Paz, Bolivia, Mehlis has led a peripatetic life living around the world including the Yukon, Alaska, Victoria and now finally, Vancouver.

Her latest exhibit, *Metanoia*, at Petley Jones Gallery (1554 W. 6th Ave.) mines her wild imagination in an exploration of human vices and virtues. The show is on now until May 19.

**Tell us what *Metanoia* is about.**

*Metanoia* refers to the ability to have a change of heart through the process of self analysis.

The act of creating inevitably leads to self analysis and therefore this body of work is evidence of channelling this process. I think that this process also makes the work more personal and honest. *Metanoia* in this case, refers to the act of painting more than to the paintings themselves.

**Of particular importance in this collection is the imagery related to vices and virtues. Can you tell us the significance of this theme?**

I have been exploring the theme of vices and virtues for some time now. I like to play with ideas that relate to these through metaphor and allegory.

For example in "Hang in There" I see perseverance. The woman is "hanging in there" even though she may be in a difficult situation. This is represented by the absence of her upper body. She wants to disappear from whatever situation she is in but still, she perseveres. "Led by Bacchus" [references] Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and excess. Since red wine is one of my vices I thought it was appropriate to warn myself of the consequences that can accompany excessive intake ... I guess it's more a self portrait than anything else.

**What's your vice — and virtue?**

As I mentioned before: red wine, also coffee, are two vices of mine.

Creativity is a virtue that pops into mind but I also try to be compassionate. The ability to see yourself in someone else's shoes is, I think, something we should all strive for.

**In your artist statement you said some of the characters you paint are imagined. How do these characters come to you?**

Mostly, I re-interpret or re-imagine themes that have already been visited by others.

I collect all sorts of images from magazines, newspapers, books and photos. I also draw from my own experiences, lived or seen, also, words or phrases from literature. I think what I do is collage images that capture my attention and compose an interesting stage/environment for them to occupy.

For instance "Alter Ares" came from a sketch that I did years ago after looking through an article in National Geographic on boars. I took that image and dressed it in armour that I re-interpreted from an Anthony van Dyck painting of a knight in armour. This is a typical approach of how I assemble my imagery.

**Animals are a recurring theme in your work. Is there one particular animal that is more important to you than any other?**

My interest in painting animals came about six years ago when I started painting humans with chicken legs. This evolved out of an interest in the juxtaposition of the human body with an inanimate object (like a table) at first and later on with an animal such as a chicken.

It was something about painting feathers; their colour, volume and texture that really attracted me. From there it kind of took off and I started down this current path. The zebra seems to have a special place in my heart. I think it's the stripes and their endless possibilities of design.

**If I weren't an artist, I'd be ...**

A professional mezzo soprano.

**What does money mean to you?**

Money means buying art supplies and keeping me fed and clothed.

In the "Ten Commandments of Money" the ones that speak to me most are: "Keep it moving" and "be a cheerful giver." But I admit that at times it is difficult to follow these rules.

**If you could own any piece of art in the world, what would it be?**

Las Meninas by Velázquez. It contains the genius of this Spanish master. Besides the technical mastery, I admire it for the powerful way his imagination is telling the story of the scene and the dignity and softness with which he handles his characters. When I saw it at the Museo del Prado in Madrid I practically fell over in awe.

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