

# Queens OF THE SURREAL



by Sara Jane Sluke  
Photos by Morgan Slade

Los Angeles has long been a favorite whipping boy of intelligentsia and hipsters alike. It is an easy target, with its plastic population, smog-choked horizon, and lack of hoity toity culture. A closer look, for those who dare peek below the botoxed facade, reveals a swollen underbelly of creative types who live by their own rules—which often means none at all. There is a strong sense of rebellion, a throbbing urge to flip off the over-manufactured faux-perfection and the business of show. This punk mentality has helped cultivate an undeniably rich and strangely unique culture, including—quite notably—art.

L.A. is the motherland of “lowbrow” art, often also called “pop surrealism.” These are catchall labels for a movement that exists contentedly outside the mainstream, in which practically anything goes. The roots of the genre took hold in the 1950s with Big Daddy Roth’s car culture cartoon mascots, then got an adrenaline shot years later thanks

to Robert Williams’ and Gary Panter’s underground comic masterpieces. The movement has grown steadily in visibility and popularity, truly coming into its own in the 1990s. The emergence of these artists and their contemporaries were a breath of much needed air in the stuffiest of environments, redefining art itself and paving the way for creative expression outside of what had previously been considered the norm.

Today’s superstars of the scene are as diverse as their art, and women are slicing out their own chunk of the pie in this previously male-dominated world. SWINDLE shines the spotlight on four queens of pop art who live and work in Los Angeles: Camille Rose Garcia, Seonna Hong, Liz McGrath and Adele Mildred. Their unique backgrounds, inimitable styles and hyper-imaginings have raised the bar for all artists—not just for women artists, or Los Angeles artists, or pop artists.







# SEONNA HONG

Seonna Hong lives the impossible dream, thriving as both a fine artist and a successful commercial one. She has already won an Emmy, a lifetime achievement for most. Yet Hong seems to be just getting started. "I continue this insane juggling act between my animation and fine art careers, with my family, my friends, laundry, and I wouldn't have it any other way. It's demanding, but there's a balance there to it, too. I straddle both the commercial and fine art world and get something very different and equally fulfilling out of both."

Hong was born in Brea, California but moved around a lot, mostly within Southern California. Attending six different elementary schools isn't easy for any kid, but Hong found a way to deal, through "drawing and painting and learning that that was a skill I could parlay into making friends and getting by on school assignments." Her constantly changing environment did not make her exempt from being a regular kid in other ways. Hong says, "I also remember being bored. A lot. I was a latch key kid that was left to my own devices to entertain myself, and so I did. I think that lent to a lot of creativity."



Hong's parents encouraged her natural artistic ability, but also stressed practicality when it came to future goals and plans. After attending Cal State, Long Beach she became a children's art teacher for several years. In 1999, she broke into the animation world and became a background painter on *Teacher's Pet*, *Power Puff Girls: The Movie* and *Dexter's Laboratory*, among others. Then, in 2004, Hong won an Emmy for Individual Achievement in Background Styling for her work on *My Life as a Teenage Robot*.

Understandably, Hong was both thrilled and thrown by the Emmy experience. "It'll definitely go down in history as one of the most memorable and surreal moments in my life. But there's always the 'morning after,' so to speak, when the little party you were throwing yourself is over. I never want to be hubristic, I just appreciate that there are lots of styles and communities in the art world and I'm thankful for the ones who have let me play at their house."

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Sparse, nostalgic, and often ominous, Hong's art is replete with cherubic children at play. She is married to fellow artist, Tim Biskup, with whom she has a cherub of her own, a four-year-old daughter, Tigerlily. Clearly, the kid has some brilliant genes, but whether or not she follows in her parents' footsteps is yet to be determined. "She draws all the time," Hong says. "I would love to say that had something to do with us, but I think it's just how she came out. If we contributed anything, it was taking the intimidation of the materials and the actual act of drawing and painting away. It's a part of our daily lives. I've seen people who claim they could never draw or paint look at a paint brush like it was going to bite them."

Hong observes, "It's interesting now as a parent, I see that there is this impulse to constantly entertain our kids, but I wonder what that may be doing to their creativity. The other day my daughter came up to me and said, 'Mommy, I'm bored,' to which I replied, 'It's good for you.'"

In 2005, Hong published her first moving picture book, *Animus*. These days she is focusing on pieces for upcoming solo shows at the Knoxville Museum of Art, Oliver Kamm 5BE Gallery in New York and Takashi Murakami's gallery in Tokyo. She also begins production on *Super Scout* for Nickelodeon, this time as art director.

As for the jokes and slams against the town Seonna calls home, she has her own way of dealing. "There are a lot of things that people complain about L.A., and it's not that I don't see it, I've just found a way to navigate around it. Your circles can be as big or as small as you want them to be," she says. "There is a serious D.I.Y., or better, a D.I.Y.O.W. [Do It Your Own Way] mentality here. It's pretty neat to see artists work their careers to individually suit them, artists from different backgrounds. And I think there's something very accessible about that."

[www.seonnahong.com](http://www.seonnahong.com)





Works by Seonna Hong, from top: *In Deep*;  
*Deer in Headlights*.

