

The Tragedy and Triumph of Mary Blair

The classic Disney work of Soquel artist Mary Blair is experiencing an international revival more than three decades after her death **BY GEOFFREY DUNN**



✓ Bio-B
More than a half-century following her greatest triumphs as an artist, Mary Blair, whose genius placed her personal stamp on many of Walt Disney's most celebrated films and amusement-park attractions, is finally getting the global recognition that was denied her during a lifetime of personal tragedy and despair.

Posterity has a way of evening things out, of balancing the universe and settling scores. Nearly four decades after Mary's death—she died in Soquel in 1978 of a cerebral hemorrhage likely brought on by acute

alcoholism—Blair is finally receiving international acclaim for her work as the principal concept artist and color stylist on a trio of Disney classics—*Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, along with her design work on several three-dimensional Disney exhibitions, most notably "It's a Small World."

For the past several years, there has been a monumental exhibit of her work on tour in Japan, curated by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, where it launched to huge crowds in 2009.

And, now, this week in San Francisco, the Disney Family Museum is launching a major retrospective on her career, one that in addition to including her work for Disney Studios, also focuses on her signature style

as a commercial artist and illustrator during the 1950s and '60s.

Her ascendant star is about to grow even brighter.

Blair's posthumous celebrity registers a deeply personal note for me, as I knew her—and her husband Lee Blair, also an accomplished artist—during the final years of their lives in Soquel, where they made their residence after returning to California from Long Island in the late 1960s.

Sometime around the time of my 16th birthday—I was a sophomore at Soquel High School—my friend Arthur Swanson, an elderly handyman and raconteur, introduced me to some new friends → 12

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of his, Lee and Mary, who lived less than a mile from my home, on a ridge with golden views overlooking the Soquel Valley and the northern sweep of Monterey Bay. Several of my childhood and high school friends lived nearby.

The Blairs were refugees, I was told, from the world of corporate advertising on Madison Avenue. They had two grown sons, several years older than me—and whom, quite frankly, I don't much recall. Later, there would be whispered rumors of family violence and alcohol-induced rages. I now suspect that many of them were true. *Ozzie and Harriet* it was not.

Arthur and I developed a friendly bond with Lee, but not so much with Mary. Mary kept to herself; she had a certain distance to her, an enforced aloofness. She smoked cigarettes at a steady rate, and as I was soon to fathom, drank rather extensively, as did Lee.

Lee was tall and outgoing, with an open face and engaging smile, bald and really quite full of himself, especially when his speech became slurred. Mary and he were roughly the same age as my mother, though Mary in particular looked decades older. She dyed her hair blonde in a pixie cut, though her graying roots often betrayed her, and she dressed in bright colors—a sort of British hip that seemed completely out of place to me.

She preferred to spend her days on the couch, or, on warm days, to sit by the pool and take in the magnificent views from their backyard patio. She moved slowly, carefully, as if she might fall at any time, and Lee often held her by the arm if she walked outside.

The walls of their ranch-style home were covered with paintings, assorted works of art and some Disney memorabilia. There were also lots of family photos, and I could not help but notice several of a beautiful woman, absolutely striking—think a 40's version of Uma Thurmond—tall and elegant with high cheekbones and calming eyes. It took me a while to reconcile the fact that the woman in the photos was the woman on the couch.

Arthur and I did odd jobs for the Blairs, mostly in their backyard and

on the terraced hillside beyond their pool, until, suddenly, Lee was no longer around. Arthur explained to me that Lee was “in the can,” as he put it, that there had been a series of drunk driving arrests and that he had been sentenced to a year in the county jail.

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None of which made Mary happy. Mary didn't like to drive, and so she often had Arthur or me chauffeur her to places around the valley. Once, when Arthur was unavailable, Mary had me drive her to the downtown jail—it was located in the building where the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History is today—and I could sense her anger and profound embarrassment over the fate that had befallen her family. By then, Mary wreaked of booze and cigarettes and French perfume and god knows what was going on with her body. Her stomach was bloated and Arthur suspected that she had cirrhosis of the liver. It was a painful ordeal to behold.

Mary ducked into the front door of the jail, and when I picked her up afterwards I could tell she had been crying. “I'll be okay,” she said. And then she lit a cigarette. Her hands were shaking. I didn't know what to say.

As we drove, she looked off to the right, away from me and in silence, out to some distant horizon that I



ELEGANT DESIGN *"She always wore designer clothes and was perfectly groomed," remembers Maggie Richardson, Mary Blair's niece.*

couldn't see and, frankly, couldn't have understood at that age. I left her at the door of her home and didn't go in. I wanted to get away from it all.

Little could I have ever imagined then, at what was probably the nadir of her life, the international recognition and celebration that would one day be hers.

Much of the Mary Blair resurgence in recent years has been facilitated by the energies of her two loving nieces, Jeanne Chamberlain and Maggie Richardson, the daughters of Mary's eldest sister, Margaret, both of whom were raised in the Santa Clara Valley (Jeanne still lives in Cupertino, and Maggie in Sonoma County).

I suspect that in many ways Jeanne and Maggie were the daughters that Mary never had. Both delight in recounting stories about visits to New York and Hollywood, with Mary taking them to fancy restaurants and on shopping sprees. They delighted in her elegance and personal grace. Jeanne recalls how Mary taught the

girls how to laugh rather than giggle.

"She always wore designer clothes and was perfectly groomed," remembers Maggie. "She wore capes and French perfumes and had a beautiful voice." They were both a bit in awe of her, mesmerized by her enormous talents and accomplishment, but also charmed by the special attention Mary paid to them. Both describe her as a "loving aunt."

In certain respects, it seems to me, Mary Blair is on the verge of becoming the American version of Frida Kahlo, minus the politics—buried during her own lifetime under the force of her husband's career (and plagued by health issues and substance abuse) only to be discovered posthumously, her artistic *oeuvre* an astonishing collection of brilliance and beauty and creativity and driving talent. She was way ahead of her time.

Blair's post-Depression aesthetic, with its flat and primitive formulations and a brightly colored

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palette, invokes the modernism of Picasso combined with the folk art of South America. "There was a magic that her stuff had that nobody else had," her Disney co-worker Marc Davis told author and animation director John Canemaker in the 1990s. "I thought her color was better than Matisse."

Certainly Walt Disney agreed.

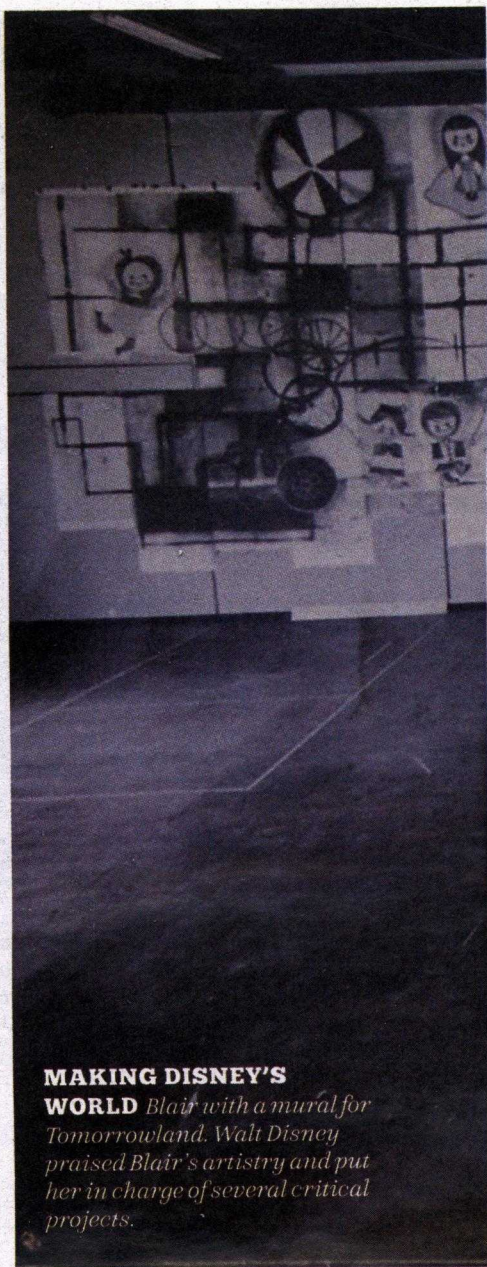
Much ado was recently made about Meryl Streep's rather hyperbolic attack on Walt Disney himself for being both a sexist and an anti-Semite, but at least in respect to the former allegation, Blair's career at Disney provides something of a counter-argument. At a time when women were relegated to minor positions in virtually *all* animation studios, Disney promoted Blair to head up several critical projects, both on the screen and off of it. He described her work as possessed of "wild and beautiful colors," and likened them to those of a vibrant sunset over the Pacific.

In a pair of superb books—*The Art and Flair of Mary Blair*, and in the introductory essay to the Japanese catalog, *The Colors of Mary Blair*—her admiring biographer John Canemaker (who has also curated the exhibit in San Francisco) has sketched out the framework of Mary's life. Born in McAlester, Oklahoma, in October of 1911, the young Mary Browne Robinson eventually migrated with her impoverished family, first to Texas and then, in the aftermath of World War I, to the southern edge of the Santa Clara Valley, near Morgan Hill.

A graduate of San Jose High School, Mary exhibited artistic talent at an early age, and, after studying fine arts for two years at San Jose State College, she won a scholarship to the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles.

It was at Chouinard that she met a fellow student, Lee Everett Blair, a native of Southern California who, at the age of 21, won a Gold Medal at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles for his watercolor portrayal of a California rodeo.

Perhaps it was a case of opposites attracting. Mary was quiet and reserved and modest to a fault. Lee was gregarious and outgoing and full of himself. Both were extremely talented.



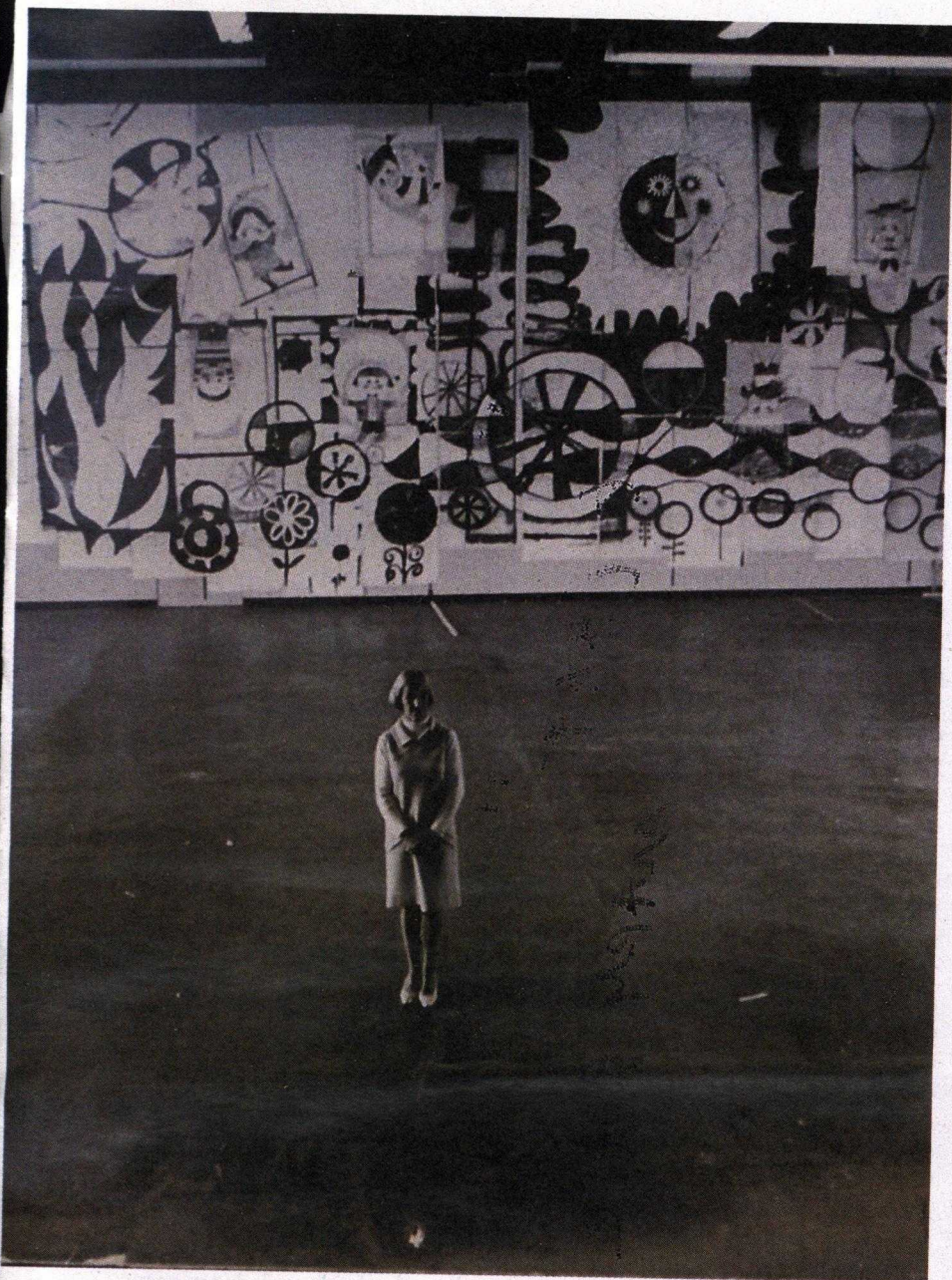
MAKING DISNEY'S WORLD

Blair with a mural for Tomorrowland. Walt Disney praised Blair's artistry and put her in charge of several critical projects.

After Mary returned home to the Santa Clara Valley for a year—she worked as a barmaid in San Jose—she returned to Los Angeles in active pursuit of a career in art. She and Lee married in March of 1934.

In a poignant—and painfully telling—note written to Lee near the time of her marriage, Mary declared: "We are artists, dear, in love with art and each other."

The economic depression of the 1930s, however, rendered the life of a struggling fine artist nearly impossible. Lee often expressed to me his distaste in going to work for the film studios and his career as an animator, but the necessities of married life, he contended, required him to earn a living. "It was way



beneath our standards," he would say with disdain, "but we needed to eat."

As it turned out, Lee's year in jail was very good for him, and very bad for Mary. Lee served as a cook and even taught elementary filmmaking courses to other inmates. Most importantly he dried up—quit drinking and joined Alcoholics Anonymous in jail—all at the age of 60-something. Not an easy thing to do.

Mary's resentments about it stewed in the dark cauldron of her psyche. Later, I heard a story about her going to a San Francisco advertising agency during this time looking for work as a graphic artist. She told friends that the agency claimed that her style

and aesthetic were "passé." She was beaten and depressed by it.

Once Lee got out of jail, they tried to put the pieces of their lives back together. Lee pushed for Mary to quit drinking. She didn't. She hated the way that Lee lorded his sobriety over her. Mary retreated back into herself. She slumped on the couch watching daytime television, long grey ashes teetering on the ends of her cigarettes, then falling like snowflakes to the floor.

By the time I started college, Mary had deteriorated greatly. Her lips were cracked and bleeding and she had trouble walking and was hunched. I saw her less frequently and our interactions essentially stopped.

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At one point, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* ran a front-page story about Lee and Mary—"They Animated *Fantasia*" it declared in bold headlines—and for the first time, I had a greater sense of their remarkable careers as artists and animators. I remember feeling this revelation, like a bolt to my chest, that this complex couple I had known the past five-odd years had been such famous figures in a world—or worlds, really—that I simply couldn't fathom.

The article focused almost entirely on Lee—his career, his accomplishments, the narrative arc of his life—with Mary's role serving mostly as filler. She had "joined her husband" on the production team of *Fantasia*; she was an adjunct. The accompanying photograph signaled much the same. Lee, on the wagon now, looked healthy and confident; Mary, in the background, appeared aged and fragile.

In what was a full-length feature, there were only two small quotes from Mary; one about Walt Disney raising his eyebrows if he was "displeased" with someone's work, and the other about the challenges of mixing careers as fine artists with animation. "It was a Jekyll-Hyde existence," she said. That was it. The rest of the article focused on Lee. It didn't mention his arrest, nor his jail time, but it heralded his roles in the productions of *Fantasia*, *Snow White* and *Pinocchio*. Lee this, Lee that.

It was always about Lee.

These days, however, it's mostly about Mary. She's come a long way from her couch overlooking the Soquel Valley.

Not long ago, when I was discussing Mary and Lee with a member of the Disney family, she posited that I was lucky to have known the Blairs in my youth. I gently confided in her that I actually didn't feel so lucky, that it had been a bit like watching *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* up close and personal for nearly a decade. I said that I would have preferred to have known them during their heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly when they traveled with Disney and his wife to South America on a remarkable cultural sojourn, when they were both young and beautiful and full of life.

I have seen *Life* magazine photographs and bright Technicolor film footage of the South American journey, which commenced in the summer of 1941 and took the Disney entourage of artists and filmmakers—dubbed "El Grupo"—to Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Peru. Both Mary and Lee seem so vibrant and fit in the imagery, so purposeful and attractive.

In a poignant—and painfully telling—note written to Lee near the time of her marriage, Mary declared: "We are artists, dear, in love with art and each other."

The trip had a transformative impact on Mary and her art. Her palette absolutely exploded in terms of color and she began to explore modernist expressions of form and movement.

In the aftermath of World War II, Lee demanded that Mary follow him to New York, where he established a film and television production company that was, at least at first, widely successful. The Blairs also began a family on the East Coast. Mary gave birth to her two children in 1947 and 1950, respectively.

With Lee's energies focused almost exclusively on his business, Mary embarked on an absolutely astounding, if not thoroughly mind-boggling bi-coastal career as mother, commercial artist and designer for Disney. Not only did she produce staggering amounts of conceptual art

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for a string of major Disney movies—*Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*—she also tended to her children and home, all the while keeping up with an expansive clientele of corporate advertisers.

Perhaps it was simply too much. She was a prodigious and prolific workhorse, but looking back on the output now, it appears to have come with a stiff price attached.

Last year, I discovered that a longtime friend of mine, Michael Zwerling of radio station KSCO-AM (1080), had also known the Blairs in Soquel in the 1970s at the same time I did. We had similar memories of the Blair household, of Mary the recluse taking refuge on the sofa, and the signature sadness that seemed to surround her. Our conversation confirmed—and revived—many distant memories. We both marveled at how Mary's reputation was on the rise so long after her death, on how new generations were recognizing her enormous and complex talents.

Michael worked on a few commercial video projects with Lee, and maintained a friendship with him following Mary's death, as did I. In the early 1990s, shortly before Lee died at the age of 81, Michael conducted a fascinating and revealing in-depth interview with Lee. He graciously provided me with a digitized copy of the interview.

I listened to the program intently. Lee's voice was frail, but still familiar, and he didn't refrain from championing his own legacy. I suppose I should not have been surprised by the fact that not once during the hour-long interview did Lee mention Mary by name. He merely made passing references to "his wife" and "getting married." It

was Michael who forced the issue by bringing the conversation back to Mary following a commercial break.

Aside from offering that she did "real good work" as a modeler for Disney, Lee utterly diminished, and even dismissed, her artistic career, and steered the conversation back toward himself. As time ran out at the end of the show, Michael said he wanted to bring back Lee to talk about Mary.

Lee mumbled.

The second conversation, Michael told me, never happened.

Hearing Lee's voice brought me back to my coming-of-age years in the Soquel Valley, to the house on the hill with the stale smell of cigarettes permeating its dark rooms and hallways. I thought about Mary there and her amazing life that led up to such a tragic denouement—and to such a triumphant revival in the many long years afterwards.

Mary's nieces Jeanne and Maggie have told me a story about being with their aunt at a 50th anniversary party for their parents shortly before Mary died. It was a boisterous affair, and there had been a slideshow made with dozens of images from family events, set to a musical soundtrack that included passages from "It's a Small World."

After the party was over and the guests were leaving and the cleanup commenced, someone turned on the music, and the girls watched Mary move to the middle of the living room.

Seemingly oblivious to the activities going on around her, Mary began twirling slowly to the celebrated refrain—"*it's a small world, after all...*"—and for her, at least, it was growing even smaller and more fragile by the second, her head tilted upward, her eyes closed, a gentle and angelic smile forming on her face.

Magic, Color, Flair

"Magic, Color, Flair: The World of Mary Blair," runs from March 13 thru September 7 at the Walt Disney Family Museum, 104 Montgomery Street, San Francisco (in the Presidio, not in the Financial District). Open daily (except Tuesdays) 10am–6pm. \$20/\$15. For more information, go to: www.waltdisney.org, or call 415.345.6800.