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Lisa Gizara: The Woman Behind the Art Behind the *Mad Men*

Some shows rise or fall on the star power of a charismatic lead, some rely on solid writing and era-centric plot twists, while others seduce with flash, style and the conviction that they've struck the Zeitgeist at just the right moment to have cool quotient locked. [Mad Men](#) hits all those bullet points.

If you arrive at the TV section of the *Huffington Post* any given Monday, you'll note anywhere from four to ten stories on the phenomenon that is *Mad Men*; perspective covering everything from plot analysis and the psychology of Don Draper, to Pete's latest blunder and the cut of Joan's jib. But regardless of these many enduring traits, *Mad Men* is mostly assuredly a study in style: the clothes, the sets, the props, the vernacular; the feng shui of it all.



Madonna 1

A most salient example would be the mid-century cool of Roger Sterling's office. With its black and white palette, space-agey *Jetsons* table and stool set, stylish accouterment, and Pop Art sensibilities, the entire room states loudly the taste of John Slattery's character, which is exactly what set decorator Claudia Didul had in mind. When she needed paintings with the specific panache to match Roger's sly and savvy personality, she turned to the collection of photographer and painter [Lisa Gizara](#), whose stunning work has graced the sets of shows such as *Modern Family*, *Castle* and *Californication*; the walls of Bloomingdale's and St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, Calif.; the pages of *Variety*, *People*, *Entertainment Weekly* and hundreds of international publications, and the exhibition spaces of designer Erinn V. Maison's in Beverly Hills and the iconic Annenberg Space for Photography in Los Angeles.

Perusing Gizara's eclectic and colorful catalogue at [Art Pic](#), a gallery of contemporary art often used by television and film set designers, Didul found the

swooping, curvaceous lines of "Madonna 1," a painting of mixed media (paint, graphite and oil stick), ideal for the wall behind Roger's desk.

"This painting was a miracle, as it came effortlessly and magically through me one afternoon," Gizara explained. "It was as if I stepped aside and a divine power stepped in to form this perfectly balanced composition out of a bunch of crazy gestural lines."

Given the character's notoriously sexist bent, she notes the irony of it hanging in Roger's office. As one viewer commented, "Amazing, the choice of this particular painting of the iconic 'mother and child,' almost foreshadowing Roger's affair and illegitimate baby with Joan. The fact that it's placed over his shoulder seems a fitting and fascinating reminder of his peccadillos."



King of Hearts



Queen of Hearts

The paired pieces on either side of Roger's door are the "King of Hearts" and "Queen of Hearts," black, white and amber paint on wood panels. Gizara described her process in the creation of this set:

"These were painted almost entirely with my hands and fingers. When I work I get totally immersed in the emotions that inspire me to express myself... the smell and texture of the paint, the feeling of the wood grain, and the dance-like movement of the medium under my fingers are all an essential part of my process. It's the incredible high of creating something from nothing that forever propels me to the form."

Gizara defined these two pieces as representative of the feminine and masculine, the lovers, the yin and yang; complete opposites that come together as "seemingly balanced, or perfectly imperfect." Roger Sterling, anyone?

Often the art pieces used on TV and film sets are replications of the original work, or, if original artwork is used, it's typically rented from the artist rather than purchased; necessary, in both cases, to stay within the limited production budgets. The outright purchase of Gizara's "King" and "Queen" seems to speak to *Mad Men's* mandate for quality and authenticity while adhering to their highly-placed style bar, a component of the show as critical as character and plot. ("Madonna I" is a print of the original painting.)

From the cultural angle, given *Mad Men's* era-appropriate themes of sexism in both the homes and workplaces of its main characters, it's interesting to note that behind-the-scenes women such as Didul and Gizara exert such influence over the artistic interpretation of the places and people entrenched in those cultural norms. Gizara, in particular, takes certain satisfaction, as a female artist in the highly competitive and male dominated world of fine art, in cracking a certain ceiling in getting her work more widely acknowledged in both the creative and commercial marketplace.

"I actually still find rampant sexism in the art world -- not as much as in the *Mad Men* '60's, but I've found that if the average person looks at a piece of art and knows it was painted by a woman, most equate it as being of far less the value than a man's work."

Which, ironically, seems to echo the complaints of several of the show's female characters, most notably the petulant, but always productive, Peggy, who most clearly chafes against the "boys' club" atmosphere at Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce.

"We still live in a patriarchal society, the art world is still run by men," Gizara concedes, "and the museums and galleries are still inundated with artwork produced mostly by men, certainly less by women."

She makes the wry point that it's for that reason she almost always attributes her work with her last name only. Given her list of sterling (pun intended!) credentials accrued over a career of 25+ years, her perspective makes a stinging point about persistent gender politics in the world of art and commerce. When an artist of her caliber still finds resistance similar to that found by female characters in a '60's fiction, it's a cultural note worth taking.

Gizara, however, insists there's no bitterness in play as she confidently surges forward in the evolution of her own career, while supporting fellow female artists whenever she can.

"Staying clear in my vision and continually producing good work is my predominant focus. I believe my art stands on its own and I always strive to be better at what I do. I may have to try a little harder and be more patient until the work gains the respect of the art world but, ironically, it's on a show that explores the sexist times of *Mad Men* where my work not only speaks most loudly for itself, but has found a significant place in that very 'man's' world."



Peggy and Joan would be cheering!

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