Inez Storer: Memories from the Backlot
by Paul Liberatore

As the daughter of an Oscar-nominated art director, Inez Storer grew up in the glamour and opulence of the golden era of Hollywood in the 1940s and ’50s, learning from personal experience about the creative freedom that comes from the movie industry’s world of fantasy and make believe, its theatricality, grand illusions and cheap tricks.

It's that Tinsel Town family history that informs “Memories of the Backlot,” an exhibition of Storer’s work at the Seager Gray Gallery in Mill Valley that showcases her celebrated cinematic style.

“Her paintings are like storyboards, where Scheherazade might be having lunch with Superman while musicians and costumed extras rush to get to the set on time.” says Donna Seager, founder and co-owner of the gallery with partner Suzanne Gray.

Born in Santa Monica in 1933, Storer lived with her parents and younger brother in Pacific Palisades, an oceanside enclave nestled between Brentwood and Malibu. Her schoolmates were the sons and daughters of Hollywood people, from stars to directors and technicians like her father, who had been trained as an architect. She remembers having the kids of director Darryl Zanuck and films stars John Gilbert and Virginia Bruce as playmates.

Her actress mother was a German Jew who emigrated to the U.S. in 1927. Soon thereafter she returned to her native Berlin, but fled back to the states when Hitler took power in 1932.

“She never revealed anything about her prior life,” Storer says. “She denied her Jewish identity almost to the day she died.”

It was her father, German-born Franz Bachelin, a dashing former World War I fighter pilot, who would show her the man behind the curtain, introducing her to the artistic theatricality, the absurdity and fantasy and what she calls the “unrealized form of danger” that would later appear in her art.

All through childhood, until she went off to college in the early 1950s, she’d tag along with him to Paramount Studios while he worked on such films as Billy
“Wilder's 1953 classic “Stalag 17” and the 1955 World War II drama “The Sea Chasers,” starring John Wayne and Lana Turner. He earned Academy Award nominations for the 1959 adaptation of the Jules Verne classic “Journey to the Center of the Earth” and the King Vidor-directed "War and Peace" with Audrey Hepburn and Mel Ferrer.

“He made well over 100 films,” she says one afternoon in her airy West Marin studio, the paintings she was working on for this show leaning against walls and propped up on easels and work tables like brightly colored packages.

“From the time I was about 9 to about 15, my father would take me to work with him and I would watch them film. I'd prowl around and go behind the sets, seeing that they were held up by scaffolding. They looked real from the front, but they were fake. For Westerns, they had a backdrop that they would use over and over again. My father used to say, 'Oh, it’s not important. It’s make-believe.'”

That make believe quality of storytelling and artistic artifice emerges in the randomness, the incongruity and what Storer calls “the magical realism” of her art.

“I have things that don't belong in my paintings,” she explains. “Through collage, I glue dissimilar objects and images. It's the same as in film. You can do anything. It's all make-believe.”

In a painting she’s titled “Hollywoodland,” after the original spelling on the famed Hollywood sign, an Asian art image of a peacock coexists with gaudy drips of fuchsia and pink.

“That's very Hollywood in the 1940s,” she says, noting that it was inspired by the interior decoration her father did for the Beverly Hills home of John Farrow, Mia Farrow's father. “Peacocks were one of the symbols of opulence,” she continues. “Everything was flamboyant and pink. I went to dancing school at the Beverly Hills Hotel. It was all part of how I grew up.”

Storer’s father may have been the first fascinating man in her life, but he was by no means her last. Her ex-husband, Tom Storer, was a Marin County Supervisor who ran for congress and lost in the general election soon after the death of Robert Kennedy.

Since the 1970s, she has been married to Andrew Romanoff, the grandnephew of Czar Nicholas II, the last emperor of Russia. She met him in West Marin in the 1970s when he was a widower and she was a struggling single mother. She earn
At the same time, she earned a bachelors degree from Dominican University in San Rafael and a masters from San Francisco State, and she’s taught at UC Davis and UC Santa Cruz, Sonoma State and the San Francisco Art Institute, among other institutions.

When she and Andrew got together, she took on the formidable role of caring for a blended family of six children, two of hers and four of his. Rather than keep her from working as an artist, though, the challenges of riding herd on a brood like that had the inadvertent effect of inspiring the collage method she has refined and developed ever since.

“I was juggling the demands of motherhood and the collage process was perfectly suited for the many frequent interruptions that beset a mother of young children,” she wrote in “Allow Nothing to Worry You,” a 2015 book about her life and work. “I could pick something off my studio table and simply glue it to a surface. Anything could happen, a narrative could be found (using) the closest materials at hand.”

In that book, art historian Bill Berkson writes, “Along with its prodigious sensual attractions, Inez Storer’s art is good history, comprising family memories – her own and, by extension, those of her husband, Andrew, ‘the last of the Romanovs.’”

During a visit to Russia to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Romanov’s reign, the couple toured the Gatchina Palace in St. Petersburg where her husband’s uncle grew up. It had been nearly destroyed by the Nazis and was only partially restored. For this show, Storer created “Greta at Gatchina,” a mixed-media image of one of the palace’s reconstructed rooms with a long red carpet dissecting a checkerboard floor, the checkerboard a recurring theme in the artist’s work.

“They are very slowly restoring the palace, but they don’t have the money,” she says. “So this piece reflects the former grandeur, the let-them-eat-cake kind of thing from the past and, at the same time, the dichotomy that they can’t afford to finish the job. All they had in the room was a red carpet that led to nowhere. It was quite bizarre.”

The room is viewed through a gilded proscenium that Storer remembered seeing in another once grand palace gone to seed. In a recess on the painting, she has inserted a ghostly image of Greta Garbo that she had made from a photo of an earlier painting of the famously reclusive actress, “conflating the realms of Hollywood fantasy and Tsarist Russia,” writer Maria Porges notes in an essay on Storer’s backlot pieces.

An empty blue chair in the left foreground is reserved for the elderly pensioners
who sit in the once grand rooms acting as irascible security guards, scolding any tourist with the audacity to snap a photo. “There are always these babushkas sitting in these chairs,” she says. “That’s how they earn their money. If you take a picture they hiss at you, or they get up and accost you.”

Storer, who lives in a rambling old hotel in Inverness and works most days in her studio across Tomales Bay in Point Reyes Station, says her art usually has an aspect of implied history in images and ideas that are often inspired by the dolls and toys, trinkets and ephemera in what she calls her "home collections."

A vintage postcard was the source material for “Danilova,” a mixed-media panel focused on Aleksandra Danilova, a Russian-born prima ballerina, who became an American citizen and was recognized for lifetime achievements in ballet as a Kennedy Center Honoree in 1989. Eight years later she died in New York at 93.

Storer says she likes things to be a little off balance or out of time or space. In “Danilova,” the dancer looks suspended in the middle of the frame surrounded by various objects (there’s that blue chair again) and what could be the makings of one of her father’s sets in the background.

Dramas and plots abound in Storer’s recent work. Ocean liners ply aquamarine oceans, a Depression era game board proclaims “Back to prosperity” and Dick Tracy represents a pop culture image from the past in his bright yellow trenchcoat.

Writing about the painting “Seven Days to Make the World,” now in the permanent collection of the de Young Museum in San Francisco, Timothy Anglin Burgard, the de Young’s Curator of American Art, made note of Storer’s “conscious cultivation of a child’s drawing style,” saying her work “introduces the theme of memory, and also accentuates the sincerity and humanity of her art.”

Throughout this show, memories from the artist’s fascinating childhood as well as her life as an artist, wife, mother and teacher form a visual leitmotif, inviting viewers to let their imaginations take them on journeys of their own.