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ART + THOUGHT

CA+T Interview with Kat Larson
Interview via E-Mail
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Rachel Ishikawa, CA+T Interviewer
Kat Larson, Artist

Rachel Ishikawa: When did art begin for you?

Kat Larson: Art began when I recognized visual perception. I was five years old, and it was the end of spring. I was having dinner at my friend's house down the block. My parents' were in the process of separating, and I spent much of my time at Jenny's. She was a nice girl with dirty blonde hair that was always pulled back in a haphazard ponytail. She had a great smile and teeth that were too big for her face. Jenny lived in a yellow rambler house down the hill from where I lived—a blue rambler enveloped by three giant cedars.

Jenny and I had just finished dinner when I was instructed by her parents that it was time for me to walk home. I guess this was during a time when it was still safe for little children to walk around by themselves in the neighborhood. Jenny's mom walked me out the door. I can't remember her face, but I remember her hands. They were gentle as she cupped my shoulders from behind me and said, "Head straight home." I turned around to smile as the screen door gently clicked shut behind me. The doorbell was black and had the outline of a silver crescent moon in the center.

I made my ascent up the hill toward my house. The sun had recently set behind me, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes or however long it takes for the sky to turn into the radiant hue of violet that puts the day to rest. When I was five, I didn't know that this time was called twilight. I remember slinging my head back, my face turned up to the sky, walking up the hill in a fishtail pattern. My eyes and mouth were wide open and directed at the first star that shines at night, Venus, like she might pour candy or juice or soda pop into my hungry young mouth. I absorbed the black contours of the cedars against the not yet black night sky... And then, instantly, I became an artist, as if it were a real gift from the universe. I recognized that the sky I was looking at was not just a sky; that the color and shapes and light informed my emotion. I was in awe. This poetic practice of environmental perception continues to fuel my work.

RI: What is your creative process when you approach a new piece? Do you return to certain sources of inspiration?

KL: I liken my process to an athlete visioning herself running and finishing a marathon. She visions her body in motion. She visions the reflexes of her heart as a beating muscle. She

visions the pain in her lungs and her quads. She visions victory. So, I'm not a runner. But I am similar to a runner in that when I am excited by a new concept, or a new shape, or a new color I see, in my mind, myself making that new concept or shape or color with total fervor. I envision the whole process like I'm watching a movie, from start to finish with various different processes in-between. I watch this movie over and over in my head until I simply can't take it. I'll do anything in my power, like go broke, to make the vision in my head a reality. It never really turns out the way I see it in my head, but I very much appreciate the element of surprise as a functioning component of the [creative] process.

Last, and most honest, deadlines really inspire me. Like the athlete that signs up for the marathon, she trains specifically for that marathon. With me, I'm invited to participate in a show and the deadline of the show plants the fire beneath me. The deadline accelerates my creativity. Other points of inspiration sometimes occur spontaneously (like, I'll see light hit the wall in a certain way or shape, and I think to myself I should paint that) yet life/death cycle, spirituality and identity are all encompassing themes that I often use as source.

RI: You have spent most of your life in Seattle, WA. How does environment affect your work?

KL: I believe that my present geographic landscape is charged with ancestral and natural energy that encourages me to continue with the things that have true heart and meaning to me. For instance, my art. I feel like my dreams are affected by the energy in this area, and I know that my dreams at times can profoundly inform my work. Moving away from my subconscious motives, I love and am inspired by the natural landscape of the Pacific Northwest. The bodies of water here are also of great importance to me as well. These things show up in my work continually. I also am first generation [immigrant] on my mom's side of the family and second generation on my dad's side. I like to ponder my familial history in direct relationship to me and my environment. How did my Filipino grandmother strive and suffer on Capitol Hill in the late sixties? How did she answer to herself? And then, how do I answer to myself in the same landscape that she once answered to herself in?



Individual coffins made for dead bees. Each box is 2 x 1 x 1 inches made with balsa, encaustic, linen, thread, found objects, and of course the bees. All were constructed in 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

RI: Your work deals with human affect—bringing your audience to places of anxiety, fear, and euphoria. This requires a certain degree of trust from both the audience, who willingly enters these dark places, and from the artist, who entrusts the audience to engage with this intimate work. Could you speak on issues of affect and trust in your work?

KL: I choose to create work with a great amount of vulnerability, and I think that in doing so I am asking my viewers to respond with some vulnerability as well. For instance, I just completed a group show titled *Hard Knocks*, curated by Seattle's Olivia McCausland. The premise of the show asked participating artists to visually exemplify what "hard knocks" means to them. I chose an ultrasound image of my unborn child (I had an abortion when I was twenty-three), an image of my parents at a barbecue when my mom was almost full-term with me in her womb, and my father's death certificate. These are real things, real hard-knock-y, and I think they express the tragedy, humility, and beauty of the life/death cycle. People were touched, some speechless, but what I found is that in choosing to share such personal symbols of hardship, the viewers and I could relate to each other. They understood my vulnerability because, perhaps, they could recognize these vulnerabilities in themselves. In this process, I like to think some sort of communal trust can be established.

RI: You use the term "Video Painting" to categorize your work. Why not just use the term "Video" to classify your work?

KL: I am a cross-disciplinary artist that uses two- and three- dimensional tactics to convey whatever topic of interest is fueling me at the time. I started my artistic career as a painter and felt limited by the medium. I wanted the freedom to express my ideas and artistic capabilities beyond a canvas. Around this same time that I was fidgeting with painting, I came across Brian Eno's video, "Video Painting." Eno made a series of abstract videos to accompany his ambient music. I thought, "Why can't I just make my paintings move?" I decided to move forward with creating videos with the same principles of composition that I

executed my paintings with. Naming my video paintings as such connects me with being a painter. It's a title that connects me with my past.

RI: How about community? Your work provokes discourse around community, but does it also build community?

KL: I believe my work builds community by choosing subject matters that are personal. I think that viewers can relate to losing a loved one, having an abortion, being frightened by the future or even being frightened by the past. In acknowledging that there isn't much that separates us in the human condition, except perhaps the details that make us arrive to a particular emotion/condition, we can recognize our interconnectedness. And it doesn't always have to be dark matter that allows us to celebrate connectedness. It can be lighthearted things such as love. But I am someone who has always championed the tension between pain and beauty. I love that through suffering and hardship we can succeed and learn. Perhaps the appreciation, or less glorifyingly, the recognition of adversity can strengthen empathy. And if an artist can create a piece that conveys adversity and viewers understand, then maybe that artist is building community by showing the viewers, "Look, we're not so different. We're in this, whatever this is, together."

RI: What projects are you currently working on?

KL: I am a co-founder, with my colleague Kate Opatz, of a non-profit called Compassion Party. Compassion Party throws fundraisers for other local non-profits using artistic installations as backdrops for the events. I also am working on a site-specific installation with a roving gallery called Boondocking, led by Andy Fallat and Steven Miller. We're moving a piano into the woods for a live piano recital commenced by twilight. For added visual pleasure, Andy and Steven are helping me build an interactive structure that will house a video projection, visible from both inside and outside. In the fall, I'll be exhibiting another installation with NEPO 5K, curated by Klara Glosova, Sierra Stinson, Serrah Russell, and Zack Bent. Last, and perhaps most exciting, I'll be exhibited with CA+T's own Jan Bernabe, who's curated an exhibit titled *Queer Sites and Sounds* at University of California, Riverside. Outside of these, I am working on abstract paintings that are void concept, simply exercises for shape, line, and form. Sometimes, it's nice to turn my brain off and just make stuff.

The original can be found at www.centerforartandthought.org.