

BOTH ARTIST AND MOTHER

GRACEFULLY TACKLING THE LIVELY EXPERIMENT THAT IS BEING BOTH ARTIST AND MOTHER

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FEBRUARY 2017 – KEREN KROUL

The Stats

Name: Keren Kroul
Current Location: Minneapolis
Education: BA Fine Arts, Brandeis University; MFA Painting, Parsons School of Design.
Preferred Art Medium(s): watercolor on paper
Children (how many?): 2
Website Address(es): <http://www.kerenkroul.com>



The Questions

What is your background (where are you from, education, important details, where are you now, etc.)?

I was born in Haifa, Israel. My mother is Israeli, my father Argentinean, so I grew up speaking Hebrew and Spanish at home. When I was 5 we moved to Mexico City, Mexico, where I lived for 10 years, and then to San Jose, Costa Rica, where I finished the last 2 years of high school. I came to the US to attend college, then moved to New York City to be immersed in the arts. I attended Parsons School of Design for my MFA, and after graduating began teaching drawing and painting. My husband and I moved to Minneapolis in 2004.

Was there any part of your formal or non-formal training that prepared you for being a creative maker and mother simultaneously?

I always knew I wanted children, and I always knew I wanted to be fulfilled in my own life. I was not ready to give up either one of those aspirations. One thing I have learned to accept is that I

cannot do everything at once, that my energy and time are limited, and that I have to prioritize different aspects of life at different times, and yes, sometimes that means that things fall short, or just don't get done.



Installation view, Bloomington Center for the Arts, Bloomington, MN, August 2016

Are there any women that you find to be an inspiration for you as an artist/mother?

My aunt Ilana has always been an inspiration to me, she is a renowned psychiatrist in Israel, and advanced to the top of her field while raising three wonderful children. She continues to challenge herself to grow and learn.

Can you talk about how you are balancing your roles as artist and mother? Did you take time off after the birth of your child? How did that work? What about childcare? How did you navigate making artwork? Did anything change in your studio practice? What advice can you give about balancing these roles?

When I became pregnant with my first child, I stopped painting with oil on canvas and switched to working on paper. My intent was to continue a rigorous studio practice while minimizing toxicity, and not having to go back and forth between an apartment and a studio. Working on paper changed my relationship to the work, and watercolor especially opened up the imagery in unexpected and magical ways. I have never painted with oils since! A defining moment was being a resident at the Vermont Studio Center during my 7th month of pregnancy. Even though I was tired, I realized I could work like usual as long as I paid attention to my body and stayed healthy and rested. That continued after I gave birth to my first, and less than two years later, my second child. I always had a space in the house to make work, a wall or a desk or a corner. I am super lucky that my husband has always been supportive, and I did not work outside of the home when my kids were young. In the early childhood years, when I was tired most of the time and stressed some of the time, having a creative outlet, however brief, was refreshing and invigorating. I was very fortunate to have exhibition opportunities during this time, so I never really stopped having a studio practice, however limited. Even 30 minutes a day, or one small drawing a day, gave me the feeling that I was not giving up on my practice and the assurance that someday I would have more time and energy to really be back in the studio.



Installing at Augsburg College, November 2016

One thing I had to come to terms with was that I simply couldn't be a 100% mom and a 100% artist at the same time. Both demanded my full attention, both claimed my truest self. I could not be satisfied with half-assing either. At the beginning, I remember putting my baby to sleep, rushing downstairs to my work area, becoming so absorbed in the process of making, and then being irritated when the baby woke up. The feelings of guilt and shame at this reaction to my baby were unbearable. I was a total failure. I was neither a good mom nor a good artist. I

was angry and frustrated the whole time. What was I doing? After a couple of months of this I decided I would have to give myself a pass— expectations had to be lowered. Any time in the studio had to be seen as a gift, a privilege, and not a right, so that when I could work, it was wonderful, when I could not, it was alright. I set up the play area in the studio space, and understood that there had to be a new way of keeping a practice: interrupted, sporadic, studio work, rather than the long stretches and all-nighters I had been accustomed to before having kids. This adaptability has persisted, and I continually weave my practice into other areas of my life. Now that my kids are older, and I teach four days a week (I teach painting at Augsburg College and at the Minnetonka Center for the Arts), I still feel like I am never in my studio long enough, often enough, focused enough. However, my time in the studio is precious, I consider it a true gift, and being able to express myself creatively centers me and reminds me of who I am in a way that no other aspect of my life does. My only advice: be kind to yourself. Know that you are doing the best that you can with what you have at this moment in time. One thing I have found that has helped me is to set up small, manageable projects. For example, I periodically work on series of very small pieces, to keep my hand in the work when I don't have time or don't have the focus for the "real" work. Inevitably, these small works open up ideas, imagery, or color combinations that in turn feed the larger works.

In relation to your identity you talk about a sense of “foreign-ness”. How do belonging and identity inform your work? How is the feeling translated into a visual language?

From the beginning I always felt like a foreigner, in every place I lived and with any group of people. Maybe it was because my background was different than that of my friends, or because I spoke other languages, or because I identified with so many different groups of people at once, or because I had moved and traveled quite a bit as a child so my sense of place was not so connected to identity and belonging as it seemed to be with others.



Studio view

For the past few years I have been painting these large, dense, complex geometrical formations, using meticulous marks and delicate washes of watercolor. I use tiny brushes, so each piece takes hours and hours of labor, time becomes an element of the piece, and the process of making itself is a repetitive, meditative, mindful one, where I am very much in the moment and at the same time unaware of time and place. I have to set up an alarm or else I would work for hours on end, and someone would not get picked up from soccer practice! The works themselves look like maps of places, so perhaps I am translating identity into a physical document, creating landscapes of the mind. They are larger than I am, so I have a sense of being immersed in the work as I am making it.

Can you talk about the importance of memory in your work? How does memory change or affect perception?

Most of my pieces originate in a specific memory, which I use almost as a hook into the work. These memories are places of wonder, belonging, or



Tiny brush

fear. Patterns of sunshine on my grandmother's bedroom floor, during long summer days as a child. The blues and indigos of the Mediterranean from my bedroom window in Haifa. The carpet in our first apartment in Mexico City, during the devastating 1981 earthquake. Thinking of these moments takes me to a time, a place, and a feeling that becomes alive again.

You were recently awarded a 2017 Artist Initiative Grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board. What will happen in your studio and with your work because of this grant?

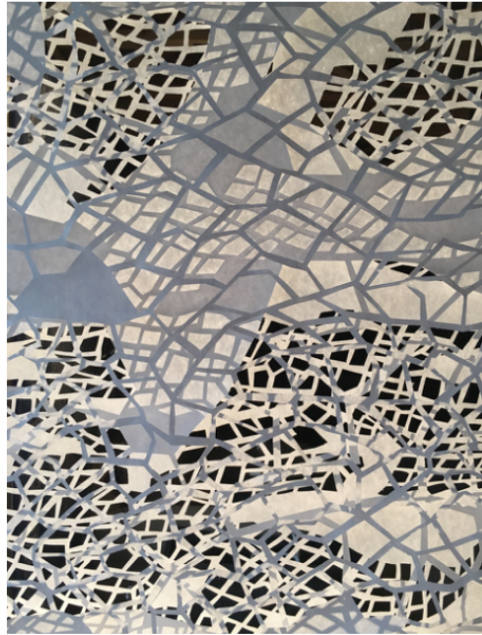
I am so grateful for the wonderful support of the state of Minnesota! Last year, I started playing with cutting imagery out of paper. I challenged myself to achieve the detail, depth, and density of the watercolor pieces, by focusing on empty space, drawing with a knife, instead of painting with a brush. My idea for the project grant was to turn this playful experimentation into something larger, more solid, more monumental. I was envisioning a large, immersive installation of cut and layered sheets of paper, a work that would have a dialogue with the watercolor paintings but at the same time stand on its own.



Cutting with an X-Acto knife

I am fascinated by your new works, *Drawing with a Knife*. Can you talk about your shift into this body of work? How is the idea 3D informing these pieces? Will color and light be part of this work and if so, how?

At the moment, it is all new! I have an upcoming exhibit at Bethel University in Saint Paul which opens March 23. I will be experimenting with some cut and layered works in that space. I don't know yet how the hanging, lighting and color will be, but I am certain that they will be an integral part of the work.



Cut and layered paper

Are there any projects, hobbies, or activities (ex. Running, knitting, tea connoisseur, arts organizations, volunteering, etc.) outside of your artistic practice that you feel passionately about? What are they? Do you find them feeding your practice? If so, how?

I enjoy running with my dog and trusty studio mate, Dov, a German Shepherd rescue. Does drinking red wine and eating pasta count as a hobby?

Anything else we should know?

I wake up every day with a "today is the day" feeling and I know I am the luckiest person to be surrounded by love and acceptance and creativity.

Finally just for fun. If you were to make a playlist today what would be your top 5 favorite songs?



Dov in the studio

At the moment, I am obsessed with Glenn Gould's Goldberg Variations. The Vivaldi remakes by Max Richter. Oblivion by Astor Piazzolla. Anything by Nina Simone and Celia Cruz.