



The Shape of Memory, detail, 2023, watercolor on paper, 10" x 8". Photo courtesy Keren Kroul.

Keren Kroul, artist

Keren Kroul examines identity, time, memory, and place through large-scale watercolor on paper paintings. Born in Haifa, Israel, to an Argentinean father and Israeli mother, Keren grew up in Mexico City, Mexico and San José, Costa Rica. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she teaches Art, Design, and Spanish. Keren is a 2023 McKnight Foundation Visual Arts Fellow, and has received support from private and state foundations. She holds a BA in Fine Arts from Brandeis University and an MFA in Painting from Parsons School of Design.

Nicole E. Soukup, essayist

Nicole E. Soukup is the Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art and Coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia). She holds a BA in Art History with minors in Anthropology and Studio Art from the University of Minnesota-Morris, and an MA from the University of Florida. At Mia, Soukup has presented exhibitions by a wide range of artists including Sara VanDerBeek, Sky Hopinka, Guerrilla Girls, and Jim Denomie. Her current research explores the intersection of trauma and resiliency in contemporary art.



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ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

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The Shape of Memory, detail, 2023, watercolor on paper, 30" x 46". Photo courtesy Keren Kroul.

Even Now

AN EXHIBITION BY
Keren Kroul

FEBRUARY 3–MARCH 17, 2024

Inherited Memories

BY
Nicole E. Soukoup

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: **Kismet** was borrowed into English in the early 1800s from Turkish, where it was used as a synonym of fate. This was an expansion on the meaning of the original Arabic word that led to *kismet*: that word, **qisma**, means “portion” or “lot,” and one early 18th-century bilingual dictionary says it’s a synonym of “fragment.”

To experience the work of Keren Kroul is to experience the fragmentation of memory and identity. Her delicate yet cacophonous watercolors exist within a gridded framework composed of unframed paper. The use of segmentation and negative space provide a sense of stability. Without this systemic approach, her work would fall into chaos — a whirlwind of color, pattern, and shape.

For Kroul’s exhibition, she has paired her large scale work, *The Shape of Memory*, 2023, with an audio and projection work, *Hasenfell-Himmel (Hare’s pelt sky)*, 2023. This pairing offers profound insights into the trauma of displacement, familial legacies, and the gifts that hope and resiliency can offer.

This essay will focus on *The Shape of Memory*, but I encourage you, the reader, to sit within the space. Hold both works with care. Spend the time necessary to lose yourself in the work. Let it be a meditation on self and family.

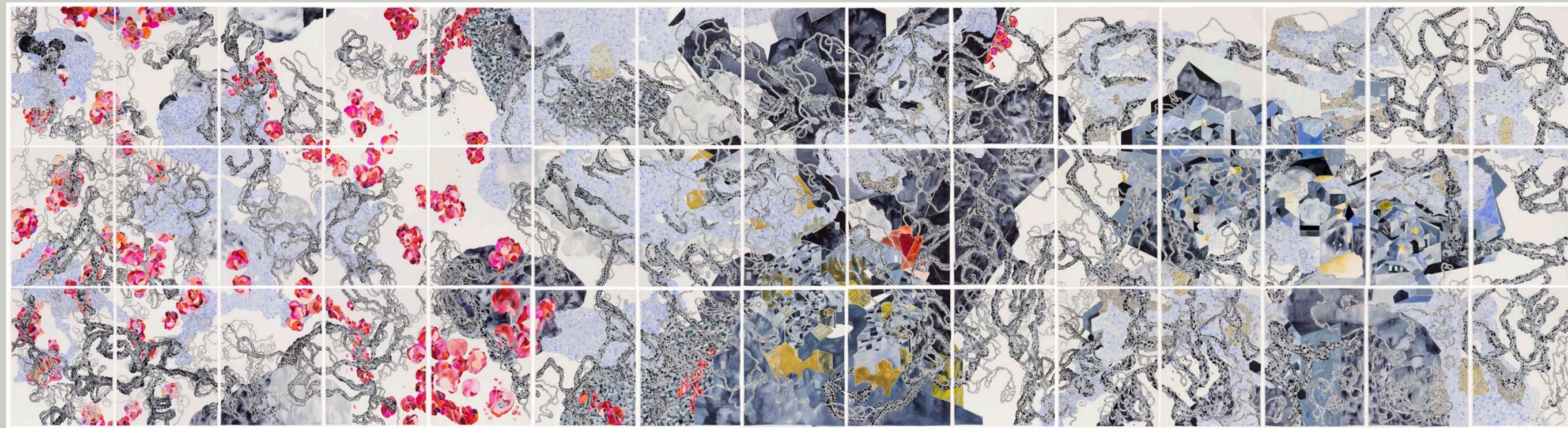
Kroul approaches *The Shape of Memory* with a restrained color palette. As with previous works, she uses a visual vocabulary built from her and her family’s memories of diaspora and displacement.

Born in Israel to an Israeli mother of Austrian-Romanian descent and an Argentinian father, Kroul grew up in Mexico City and Costa Rica. Both her paternal and matrilineal ancestors faced violent oppression. Her father was targeted during the Dirty War in Argentina. He was rescued and relocated to Israel where he met Kroul’s mother.

Her mother’s mother survived Dzhuryin, a Nazi labor camp. Shortly before the camp was liberated in 1944, her grandmother’s twin passed away. The braids were cut from her twin’s hair. A fragment of her sister that she would hold close for the rest of her life (buried with the braids in 2010).

During our studio visit, Kroul explained that the work is an investigation of her identity. The silvery, lavender and pewter-gray shapes twist and morph across the pages. Kroul’s mastery of the media is on full display. Tones fade and crescendo. The folded forms recall the braids of her grandmother’s twin. The architectural forms resemble towns and places left long ago. Edged cloud-like forms recall neurons or folds of the brain. Others look like shards of glass or quilted patches. The work is situated on the precipice of representation and abstraction — that liminal space where thought turns to memory. Within the twisted braids and architectural angles, red bulbous forms take shape. The flowers are alluring but verge on repulsive tumors. Allure and repulsion. Hope and trauma. Juxtaposing forces that shape our identities.

Unknowingly, Kroul painted the flowers that grew outside her grandmother’s ancestral town. It is a story best told by Kroul but it is a situation that might be familiar to all of us. An attraction to an object that comes from somewhere almost primal. Only to find out from a parent or elder in passing the object has held deep meaning for generations. It almost feels fated to have happened, *kismet*.



The Shape of Memory, 2023, watercolor on paper, 90” x 360”. Photo courtesy Rik Sferra.

“Something about the painting being the same size as my body makes me feel that I’m part of it and in a different world. I paint standing up and it’s very physical. With each small shape, I feel I’m almost recording units of time and memory,” Kroul noted in a recent interview.

As so many studies have noted, the body holds onto and is shaped by trauma. Research on the epigenetic impacts of trauma have revealed the socio-economic impacts it leaves for multiple generations. One way to explain this legacy of inherited trauma is to look at the birth of a cisgendered woman.

If a woman experiences a trauma like starvation, genocide, or even imprisonment, the trauma will impact her on a cellular level. Should she become pregnant, the genes informed and changed by trauma (also known as epigenetics) will be passed to her children. At the time of birth, her daughter will have all the ova she will ever produce.

Thus ensuring that the mother’s grandchild will also inherit the genetic markers. Our lives undeniably impact future generations.

If you will continue to grant me the poetic licenses, viewing Kroul’s work through the lens of epigenetics and embodied trauma infuses the work with a new, delicate understanding. Concepts like *kismet*, systematic oppression, memory, and family become entangled in this smokey haze. It is upon her to continue to untangle and define. However, identity is both an internal understanding and an external expression. It is left to you, the viewer and reader, to complete this expression of self.

So the question arises, how do you heal trauma kept within the body?

You confront it with curiosity and compassion — as Kroul has done in *The Shape of Memory*. An event becomes traumatic when you cannot prevent it from happening. While experiencing it, the body enters flight or fight — a survival mode. Thus to heal, you must

learn to live in a body and space that feels fundamentally safe. It is a slow process that might require years to achieve. Being in connection to those who listen and hold space for what happened is needed to ground the self. But to begin the healing, the person must first be vulnerable and have hope — the hope that it can change.

When Kroul discusses her process it is an act of meditation. She notes, “I am interested in slowness, slowing down the making, to capture an essence of something ephemeral, at the edge of things, just beyond reach.” The tension of grasping for something unknown, to only be partially found, makes the work relatable. It is something that happens throughout our lives.

If *The Shape of Memory* is read chronologically, then we must start on the right. Kroul’s mother tongue is Hebrew, a language that is read right to left. Here the smokey, pewter-gray is infused with flashes of gold. Slowly unfurling into peaks of red and golden

yellow in the middle third of the work. Finally, the last third (on the left side) blooms with sweet peas, a poisonous but beautiful flower.

The artist created this work at a moment of profound personal change. Her children have grown and left home. Her grandmother passed away in 2010. The pandemic allowed her to shift gears and reapproach her practice. To take time to slow down and carefully examine who you are is a privilege — a privilege that the artist does not take lightly.

As the world erupts into war, another economic downfall, another decade of rapid climate change — despair and anxiety comes easy.

Kroul’s work serves as both a cautionary tale and fragment of hope. Tomorrow will come. It will be built upon the memories that we choose to take with us, that we knowingly and unknowingly hand to those who come next.