

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

# “Everything Is a Process”

Nicole Havekost  
& Keren Kroul



Nicole Havekost (she/her) [left] makes sculptures influenced by the mysteries of the human body. Keren Kroul (she/her) makes large-scale watercolor paintings that she calls “fantastical landscapes of the mind.”

**Nicole:** Did you have assumptions about the life of an artist before you were one? What did you think it would be like?

**Keren:** When I was in undergrad, all of my professors were artists, mostly from New York, and overwhelmingly men. My favorite painting teacher, an older man, took us girls who were the most serious about art and told us, “Listen, if you want to be an artist, no kids, hopefully no husband. You’re never going to make it if you become someone’s wife.” He had kids, but he was a man, right? So very early on, my idea of what an artist looks like was a dude, and probably no family to tie him down, because you should be able to go to your studio and do whatever you want.

For grad school I went to Parsons School of Design in New York. Most of the professors there were men as well. Because it was in New York, I assumed that to make it as an artist, you have to get picked up by some gallery, and after that the path is paved. One thing that’s been amazing and positive is the realization that, after leaving school and making work on my own for years, “making it” just means having a practice that is consistent — still being curious and creative and wanting to solve visual puzzles. Even when it’s frustrating and I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing, my studio is the one place where

it’s just me — not me as someone’s daughter, someone’s mom, someone’s employee, someone’s teacher.

Early on after grad school, I got pregnant. I knew that if I was going to make anything, I had to work at home and I had to work with materials that were non-toxic. I made a studio at home and worked with watercolors. All those practical choices that I made took all the excuses away, and I was able to have a continuous practice throughout the years. So my previous assumption of what an artist would be is the exact opposite of what I am.

**Nicole:** We didn’t have good examples in college, or out in the real world, to see how to do it.

**Keren:** Nobody talked about what it’s like to balance having a family and a job and a studio. The presentation was always that artists are independent and self-centered — whether that was true or not.

**Nicole:** When did you start calling yourself an artist?

**Keren:** I don’t know. It’s hard. It’s such a loaded word. And again, it’s tied up in all those expectations about what an artist is. Even today, if people ask me what I do, I usually tell them where I teach. It depends who I’m talking to whether or not I say I’m an artist. Maybe if we lived somewhere else, where

being an artist was just a normal thing, it would be different.

**Nicole:** There is a certain kind of art career that happens in major metropolitan areas on the coasts. What does it look like to be an artist in the Midwest who is middle aged with a kid?

**Keren:** Who has these crazy studios? Nobody that I know. So, yeah, it's a strange vocation, right? In any other career, there's some linear movement. You start and 20 years later you're clearly at a higher level. I don't feel that way. I feel like it's cyclical; maybe one year you get recognized and that's lovely. And then you can have 10 years of nothing.

**Nicole:** In college, I knew I was a good technician and good at drawing and I loved fabric, so I studied apparel design. In that course, you had to draw someone nine heads tall, even though that was not their accurate proportion, which drove me crazy. At that time, I didn't know that you could have a voice and that was part of being an artist. So originally, for me, it was "I have these skills that some people don't have and I enjoy doing this thing." But I think the real discovery in becoming an artist was figuring out exactly how I wanted to say things with materials.

**Keren:** How does your process of making work today tie into your background in drawing and design?

**Nicole:** I can be a good planner, but I don't enjoy it. Having a plan tends to feed the perfectionism in me, which turns off my intuition, and my intuition is where my secret power is. So my actual process of working in the studio now is I have an idea in my head for what I want this thing to be, but I'm making it so I can see what it looks like. As I'm going through the process of making, I can make decisions about how it needs to change in order to be closer to what I think it needs to look like, but I don't draw first. I'm in conversation with the material, and it tells me what it wants to do. How about you?

**Keren:** Very similar, but unlike you I was never a good draftsman. My process is completely intuitive and organic. Usually I have something to start with, which could be either an idea or a shape, line, or color. I feel like there's always two things going on. There's the thinking about things that are more thematic, which goes into the artist statement, but working on the piece itself is really more about responding to what is in front of me — line, color, shape. I love accidents because they force me to allow things to happen. It is this magic, when you're letting go. I never know what something's going to look like, I never know how large it's gonna get when I start.

Do you make art for a particular community?

**Nicole:** No, I make art for myself.

**Keren:** Same.

**Nicole:** And again, mostly because I want to see what it looks like. And usually it ends up being a giant hairy vagina.

**Keren:** (*Laughing*) It's what everyone wants to see.

I'm the same. Philip Guston had this great quote about how, when you start painting, everyone's in your studio — your teachers, your friends, your lovers. And slowly everybody leaves. If you're really lucky, even you leave at the end. If anybody happens to like what I make, that's great, but that's definitely not a driving force.

**Nicole:** I make work to know myself better.

**Keren:** It's a hunger.

**Nicole:** How does money impact your creative life?

**Keren:** When I was young I assumed that being an artist meant that you lived off your art. In reality, every artist needs a steady source of income that is independent of the creative process. This is both practical, because making things and selling them is not a reliable source of income, and also

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creative, because thinking of making things that you can sell will inevitably change your creative process. Personally, I am supported by my partner financially. I have also been teaching part time and full time for over 20 years.

**Nicole:** I have written successful grant applications, so there has been some money that has made things easier. I wish I could get to a place where I didn't have to have another job, but I'm not there yet and I don't know that I'll get there. I'm fortunate that I have a husband who really values supporting my creative practice. We've prioritized raising a kid and me being at home and making work. I think it's about being really clear about those choices. At some point when we retire, we understand that we may be limited.

**Keren:** If you want to have a family, I think it's really hard to have two people who are trying to be creative. It's nice to have both the financial support and the moral-emotional support of somebody who respects and values the art, and who knows that there is no connection between how much time you spend making and the financial reward that may or may not come in. Sometimes it's tough to justify; this is what I'm putting all my time and effort into, and there is no visible reward in the "real world."


**Nicole:** Right. And also, sometimes it feels selfish that it's the thing that makes me happiest. I know going to his job does not always make my husband the happiest.

**Keren:** I feel the same. It's a huge privilege.

**Nicole:** Having to make some money, and trying to spend as much time as I can in the studio, sets up priorities for the rest of my life. I don't have a clean house. I don't use recipes to cook. Rest can happen because I'm willing to let other things go. I think that's something that happens with age.

**Keren:** I think something that translates from the studio to larger life is "everything is a process and nothing is static." One of the best things about being a creative person is not having a black-and-white way of thinking. It's such a privilege to be in that mental space where it's not about constant achievement. Showing up every day counts as winning in what we do. When you look back, you see a progression, but there's never a touchdown with the creative process; there's never a piece that is going to be the end of all pieces. Ultimately, this is success to me — finding other people I can talk to who think art is the bomb and that there's nothing else we want to do.

**Nicole:** I have a couple of artist friends here in Rochester. When I'm not certain about something I'm making, we'll go somewhere for lunch. After we eat, I'll whip out this weird thing from a brown paper bag and they totally get it; they know my questions before I even ask them.

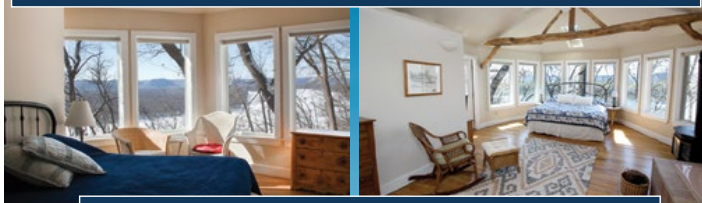
**Keren:** We just speak a different language. 

*dreamers welcome*



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