

CAROLINE KENT | PORTFOLIO



KOHN GALLERY

CAROLINE KENT

Born 1975, Sterling, IL
Lives and works in Chicago, IL

Caroline Kent explores the relationship between language, translation and abstraction through her enigmatic paintings and drawings. Beginning with all-black surfaces, Kent's mark-making conjures pre-linguistic symbols, whose fleeting shapes and shifting perspectives suggest both the power and the limitations of language, and ultimately questions the modernist canon of abstraction. Kent received her MFA from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, in 2008, and a BS in Art at Illinois State University, Normal, IL, in 1998. Current and recent exhibitions include Five Ways In: Themes from the Collection, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2019); The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY (2018); Monique Meloche, Chicago, IL (2018); DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL (2018); Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul, MN (2015); and California African American Museum, Los Angeles (2012). Upcoming group exhibitions include the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL (2020) and The Shed Museum, New York, NY (2020); as well as a solo exhibition at The College of New Jersey, Ewing Township, NJ (2020). Kent is a recipient of the 2016 McKnight Fellowship for Visual Arts; 2015 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant; and a 2009 Jerome Fellowship in Fine Art. She was a Fellow at Shandaken Projects Paint School, New York, the co-founder of Bindery Projects, Minneapolis, and her work is in the permanent collections of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; and Macalester College, Saint Paul, MN.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

In my practice I am driven by a curiosity to discover where language, abstraction and painting converge. This curiosity takes the multiple forms of drawings, paintings, text, sculpture and performance.

I. LANGUAGE

I am focused on building an abstract painting language that expands beyond the frame and beyond the form. All of the paintings I produce have a beginning in a catalogue of works on paper started back in 2014. This catalogue is an investigative measure that contains over 200 paintings on paper that all adhere to the same size and start, 22 x 30" and a foundational layer of black gesso. As an on-going endeavor the catalogue serves as a jumping off point to make other works from. Painting is not a means to an end but a beginning, through which I can freely consider how producing pictures in the world can potentially operate and stimulate how we think about communicative structures.

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One question that drives my inquiry in the studio is, "How can language be constructed that is not restricted to the same communicative means that are common to everyday life?" "What constitutes language when limitations are removed for understanding?" Much like watching a foreign language film without subtitles, I ask, what are the registers for relating word to image and language to form.

II. ABSTRACTION/ALTERITY

Forms and shapes are potential signifiers of their former lives as things in the world, formerly as objects, symbols, or architecture, now stripped of their identifiable thingness, and yet in this state, retaining a quality of their familiarity. Improvisation and invention are modes I often find myself working in as I make the work as well as how I move beyond it. By move beyond, I mean, how I keep pushing the inquiry-asking the absurd-- and unfolding and refolding the kinds of images I produce; defining and defying dimensions spatially and metaphorically. Abstraction here functions as a means to side step this world and enter a different one. The façade of the painting is merely a veil, an icon, a Twilight Zone entrance, or an exit, into perceiving, without the trappings of-being able to or having to-name a thing. If we are talking space and place, we are talking geography, a kind of geography that is not mapped by means of surveillance instruments but one that is accessed, imagined, possessed by situating within ourselves an understanding of a kind of geography that does not confine itself, submit itself to this world, but the next, or the beyond.

III. TRANSLATION

The move from a 2-dimensional pictorial space to painted objects that hang on the wall, to free standing sculptures- are all acts of translation -and these are just the ones that are noticeable upon first looks. I see the act of translation as a means to expound upon the content of the work. I am interested specifically in what is gained in an act of translation as opposed to what is lost, and when varying forms of the work exist together, how the multiplicity of forms can create a kind of cacophonous affect- a chorus, an argument, or a call and response. Developing a new kind of cadence for talking that has yet to be pronounced, in a way that requires a new kind of saying and a new kind of interpreting; an outside the way kind of reception is necessary. Performance is a vehicle for this new kind of saying. This new kind of saying emerges when conditions for its reception have been prepared; where shapes can stand up and learn to be spaces and spaces can teach new bodies how to be. This process of building future architectures and ways of being calls on the viewer to contemplate origin, the where of this language. I consider this process the "gaining" in translation.

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EDUCATION

- 2008 Master of Fine Art, University of Minnesota, MN
1998 Bachelor of Science, Art, Illinois State University, IL
1998 Study Abroad, University of Wolverhampton, England, UK

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2020 *Upcoming solo exhibition*, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Upcoming solo exhibition, The College of New Jersey, NJ
Upcoming solo exhibition, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Chicago, IL
Upcoming solo exhibition, Hawthorn Contemporary, WI
- 2018 *Beyond the Kármán Line*, Saint Catherine University, Saint Paul, MN
How Objects Move Through Walls, Company Projects, Minneapolis, MN
Disappearance of the word, Appearance of the world, Union for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE
- 2016 *Joyful is the Dark*, Public Functionary, Minneapolis, MN
- 2014 *When You're Not Looking, I'm Loving You*, Bethel University, St. Paul, MN
The Height of Fiction, Nemeth Art Center, Park Rapids, MN
- 2013 *How I Tell It to Myself*, Elephant, Los Angeles, CA
St. Wilma and the 4th Dimension, Juxtaposition Arts, Minneapolis, MN
- 2010 *Romanian Palimpsest*, Rochester Art Center, Rochester, MN

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2020 *Untitled Project*, The Shed Museum, New York, NY (Forthcoming)
Duro Olowu: Seeing Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL (Forthcoming)
- 2019 *Five Ways In: Themes from the Collection*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
It grows between: Amalie Jakobsen, Caroline Kent, Jerónimo Reyes-Retana, Alan Ruiz
Efrain Lopez Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2018 *On the Road: Caroline Kent, Basil Kincaid, Esau McGhee*, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, NY
So close, far away, Sector 2337, Chicago, IL
Out of Easy Reach, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
Paint School, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY
NAVA, Napoleon, Philadelphia, PA
Up close, Step Back Further, Studio 1469, Washington, D.C.
Group Exhibition, Monique Meloche Viewing Room, Chicago, IL

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- 2017 *Out of Easy Reach: 2018-1908*, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL
Midnight Sun, Triumph, Chicago, IL
It will be more like scratching than writing, Goldfinch, Chicago, IL
Dull Magic, UNISEX, Brooklyn, NY
- 2016 *Axes for Abstraction*, Saint Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN
- 2015 *Imaginary Landscapes*, Mana Contemporary Chicago, IL
What is "American Art", Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul, MN
- 2014 *Full House (west) MSP/NYC*, David Rich Space, St. Paul, MN
How to Make a Hood, Washington Arts Incubator, Chicago, IL
Objects for Consideration, SOOVAC, Minneapolis, MN
Doubleplusgood, Tuck Under Projects, Minneapolis, MN
- 2013 *Nate Young and Caroline Kent*, The Suburban, Oak Park, IL
Works on Paper, Burnett Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
Josephine Lutz Rollins Exhibition, Katherine Nash Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 2012 *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
- 2011 *Place*, SUNY Dutchess Community College, Poughkeepsie, NY
- 2010 *Jerome Fellowship Exhibition*, Minneapolis College of Art & Design, MN
Greater Minnesota Biennial 10, Soap Factory, Minneapolis, MN
- 2008 *Open Door 4*, Rosalux Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
[] scapes, M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition, University of Minnesota, MN
- 2007 *Drawing and Painting*, Larsen Gallery, St. Paul, MN

VISITING ARTIST TALKS/LECTURES

- 2018 Visiting Artist Lecture, St. Catherine's University, St. Paul, MN
Creative Practices Public Panel, The Minneapolis College of Art & Design, St. Paul, MN
Visiting Artist Lecture, Oxbow Residency, Saugatuck, MI
Artist Talk, Northwestern University, Art, Theory and Practice, Evanston, IL
- 2016 Artist Talk: *Axes for Abstraction*, Saint Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN
- 2015 Artist Lecture, *How I Tell It To Myself*, Bethel University, St Paul, MN
- 2012 *Sacred Space/Contested Terrain*, Yesomi Umolu, Walker Art Center Curatorial Fellow
and Artist Caroline Kent, Regis Center for Art, University of Minnesota Lecturer:
- 2011 *Romanian Palimpsest*, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie, WI
- 2010 *Romanian Palimpsest*, Rochester Art Center, MN
- 2008 Symposium: *Displacement*, University of Glasgow, Scotland
- 2007 4th Romanian Conference, *Romania through the eyes of a Young American Artist*,
Columbia University, NY
- 2006 *Crafting a Vision for Art, Equity and Civic Engagement Workshop*, California College

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of the Arts, San Francisco, CA

AWARDS, GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

2019	Artadia Finalist Chicago
2018	Shandaken Projects, Paint School Fellowship
2016	McKnight Fellowship for Visual Arts
2015	Pollack-Krasner Foundation Grant
2015	MN State Artist Initiative Grant
2013	Creative City Making Grant
2011	MN State Artist Initiative Grant
2009	Jerome Fellowship

PROJECTS

2020	Upcoming Project The Shed Museum, NYC
2018	Avant Garden Artist Print, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
2011-16	Co-founded The Bindery Projects, a visual arts project space, located in St. Paul, MN

RESIDENCIES

2018	Amy Marie Sears Visiting Artist, St. Catherine University, St. Paul, MN
	Visiting Faculty Artist, Oxbow Residency, Saugatuck, MI
2009	NES Artist in Residency, Skagaströnd, Iceland

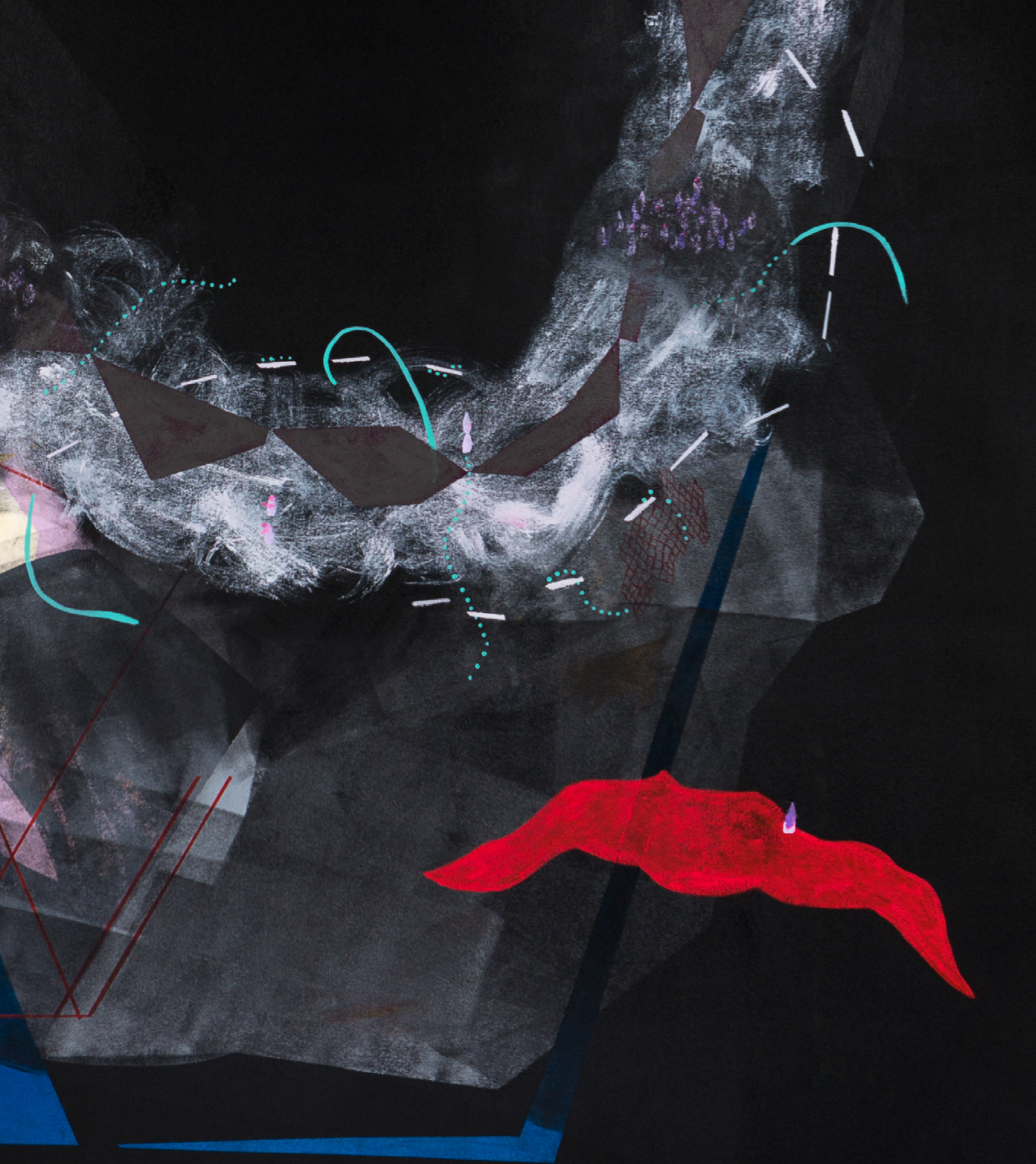
COLLECTIONS

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
Macalester College, Saint Paul, MN
Joyner/Guiffrida Collection (Pamela Joyner)

PAINTINGS



Caroline Kent, *Further and farther than one expects*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



detail: Caroline Kent, *Further and farther than one expects*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



Caroline Kent, *Not buried, but just under the surface*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



detail: Caroline Kent, *Not buried, but just under the surface*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



Caroline Kent, *Set design for a play about the folding of one's hands*, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



detail: Caroline Kent, *Set design for a play about the folding of one's hands*, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



Caroline Kent, *A kind of witness*, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



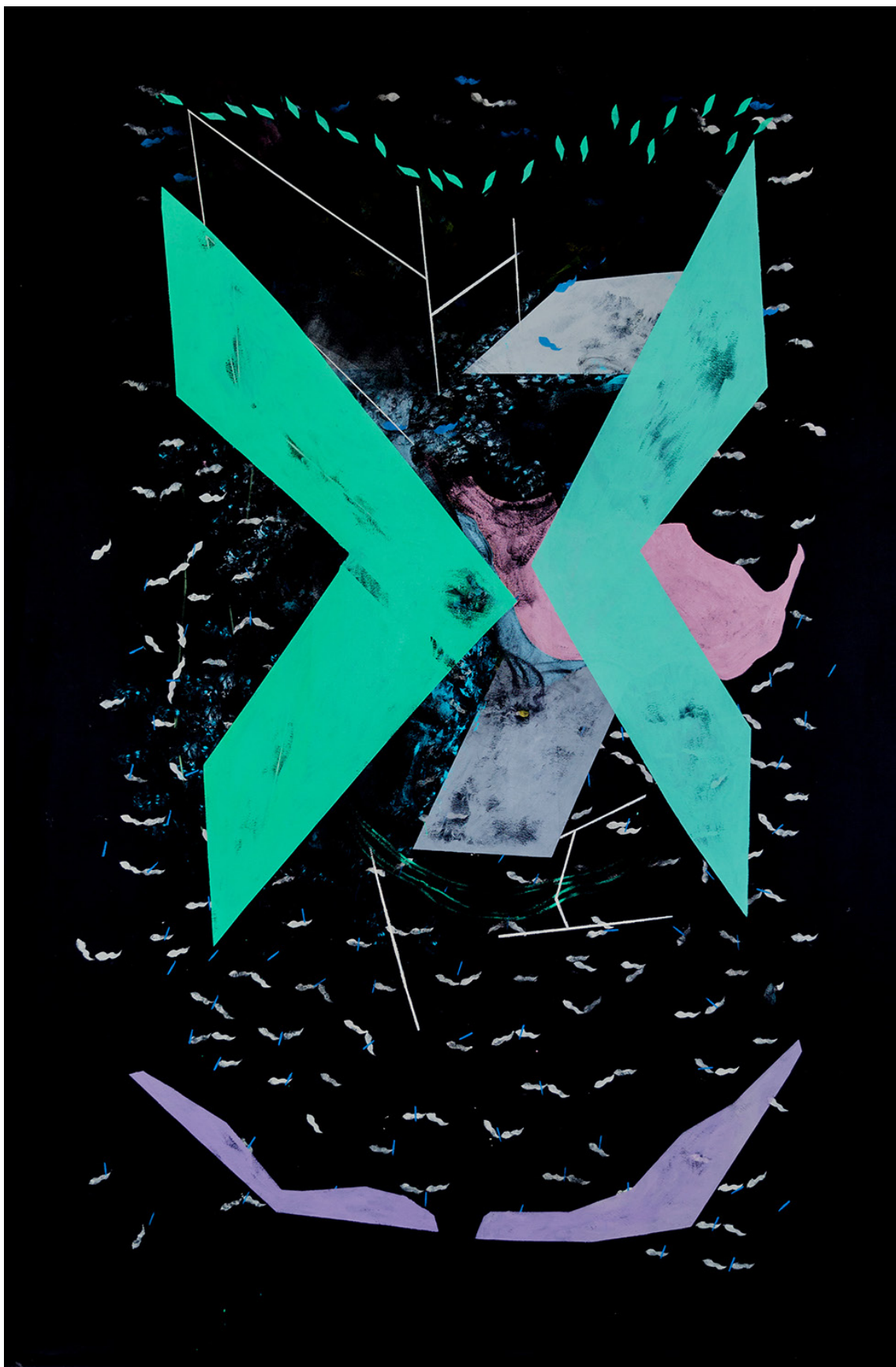
detail: Caroline Kent, *A kind of witness*, 2016.
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



Caroline Kent, *Discernible silhouettes*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches



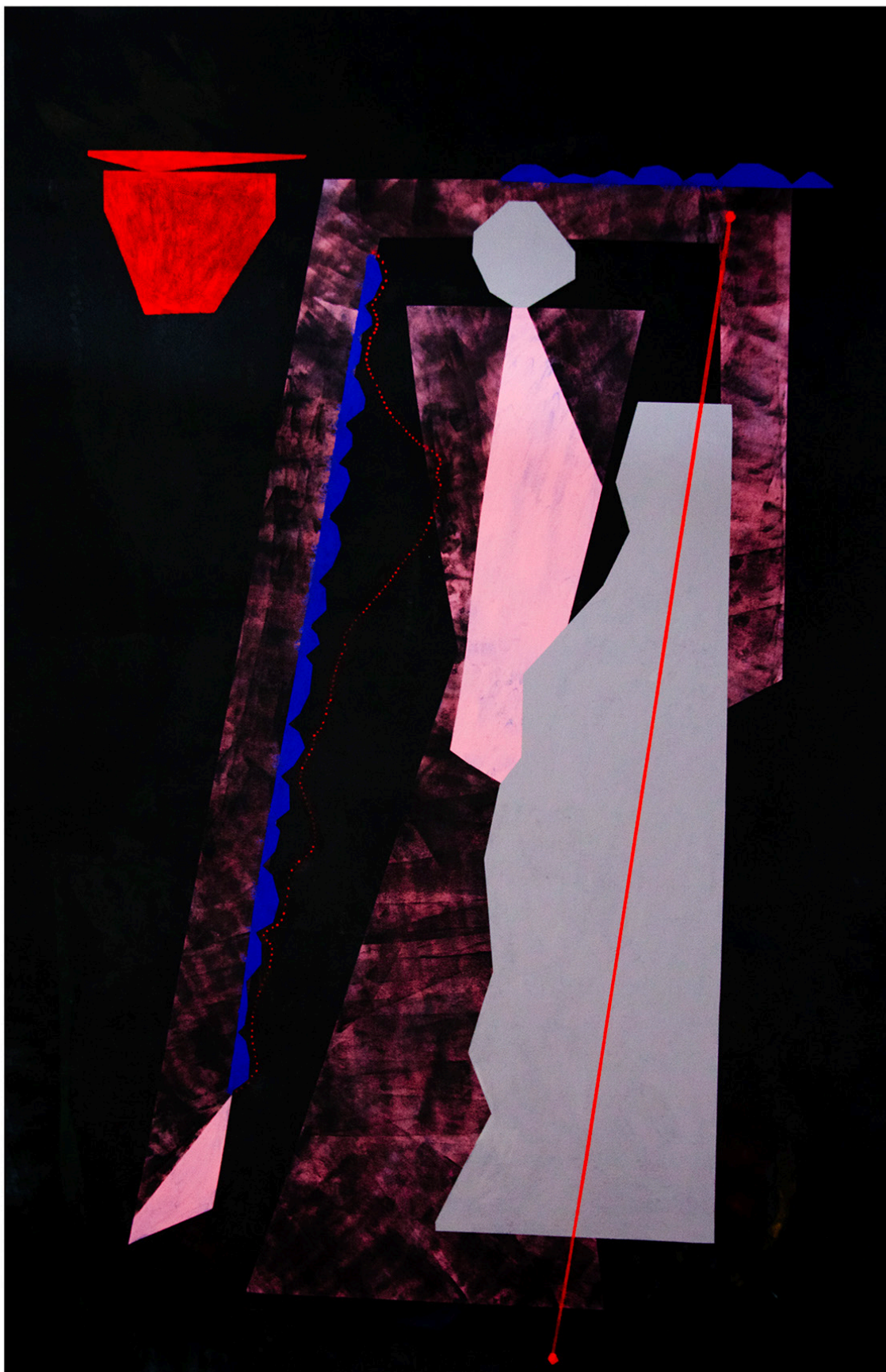
detail: Caroline Kent, *Discernible silhouettes*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches



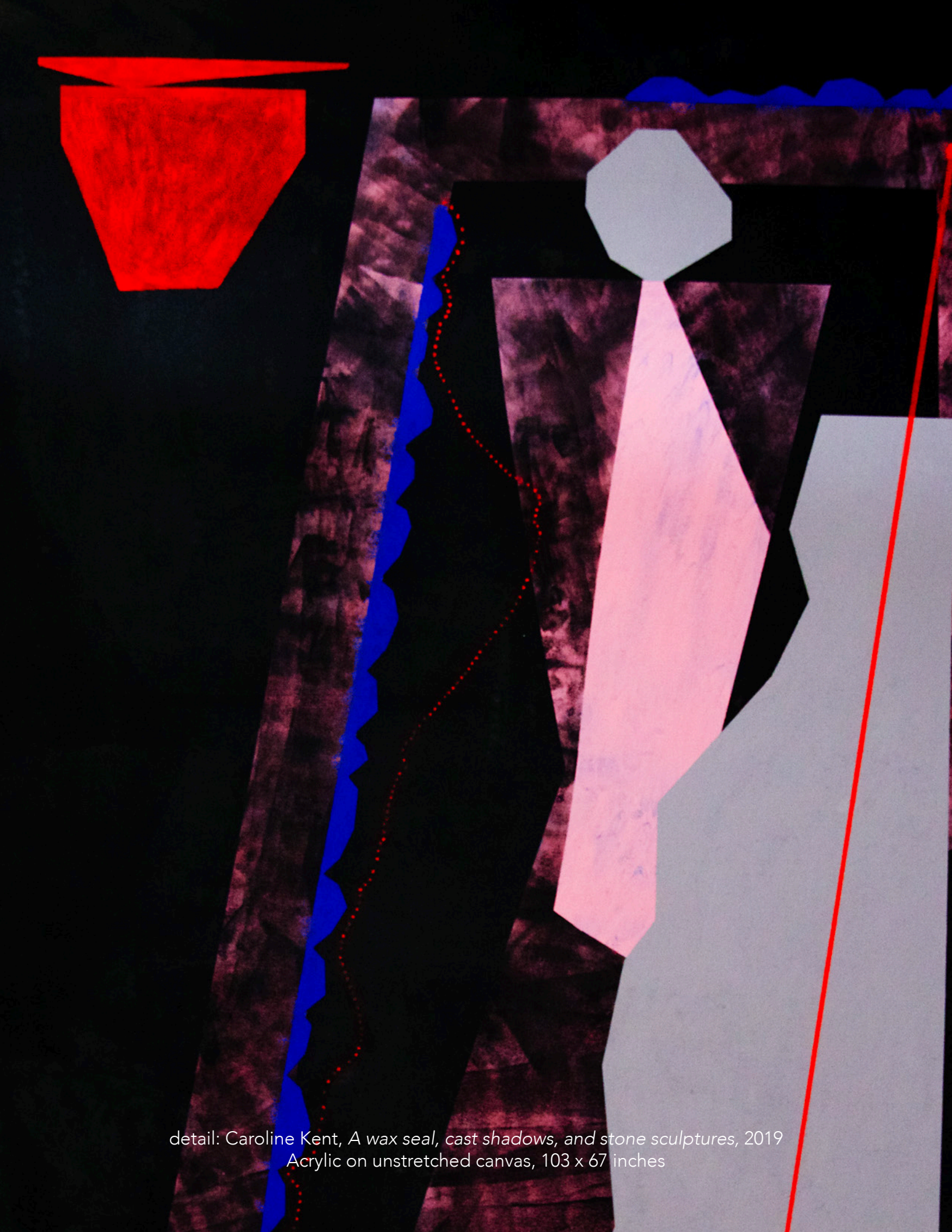
Caroline Kent, *The Penultimate Step*, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



detail: Caroline Kent, *The Penultimate Step*, 2016
Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 72 inches



Caroline Kent, *A wax seal, cast shadows, and stone sculptures*, 2019
Acrylic on unstretched canvas, 103 x 67 inches



detail: Caroline Kent, *A wax seal, cast shadows, and stone sculptures*, 2019
Acrylic on unstretched canvas, 103 x 67 inches



Caroline Kent, *The reappearance of former things*, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches



detail: Caroline Kent, *The reappearance of former things*, 2017
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches



Caroline Kent, *A plan for scaling a disappearing wall*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches



detail: Caroline Kent, *A plan for scaling a disappearing wall*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 30 inches



Caroline Kent, *Parade of unlocatable objects*, 2018
Acrylic on unstretched canvas, 103 x 69 inches

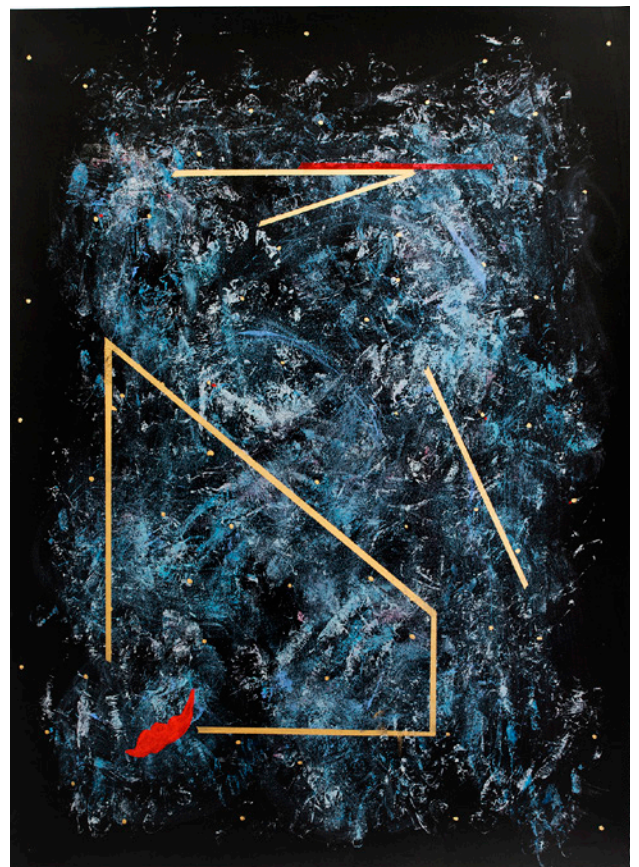
WORKS ON PAPER



Caroline Kent, *Signals (part two)*, 2019, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches
 Caroline Kent, *Orchestral rearrangements (Part One)*, 2019, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches

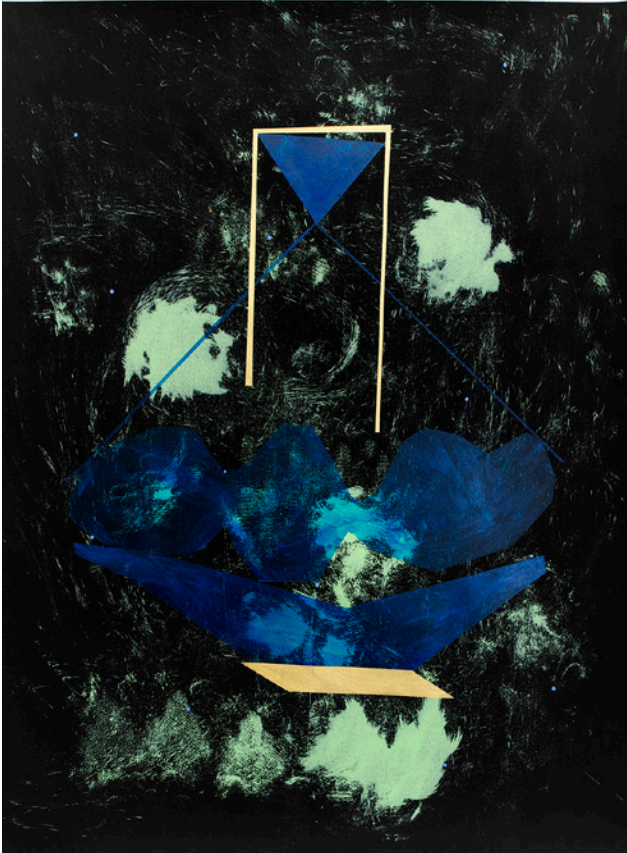


Caroline Kent, *A path around monuments*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches



Caroline Kent, *A symphony in silence (part two)*, 2019, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches

Caroline Kent, *A strategy for plotting one's future movements*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches



Caroline Kent, *How to tell when air has left the room*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches

Caroline Kent, *A sound becomes a symbol*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches

INSTALLATIONS



Five Ways In: Themes from the Permanent Collection, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN



Out of Easy Reach, 2018, Grunwald Gallery, University of Indiana, Bloomington, IN



Out of Easy Reach, 2018, Grunwald Gallery, University of Indiana, Bloomington, IN



Joyful is the Dark, Public Functionary, Minneapolis, MN



Joyful is the Dark, Public Functionary, Minneapolis, MN



Joyful is the Dark, Public Functionary, Minneapolis, MN



Disappearance of the word, Appearance of the world, Union for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE



Disappearance of the word, Appearance of the world, Union for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE

PRESS

CAROLINE KENT

Caroline Kent's exploration of language and semiotics has evolved through the production of abstract paintings on paper. Her compositions use geometry, color, and pattern as a method of communication, suggesting a visual manifestation of linguistic concepts of rhythm, tone, and cadence. Kent positions abstraction as a language and translates cultural references and her personal experiences through her painting, inviting the viewer to explore a new visual syntax.

Kent primarily creates large-scale compositions, beginning with a matte black background upon which a visual glossary of gestures, shapes, juxtapositions, and patterns is assembled. The decision to consistently begin with solid black is an effort to challenge the formal notion of the white background as a natural beginning or a neutral starting point. In Kent's paintings, the black space is not a flat shape, but instead an opening to a different kind of space, amplifying the artist's use of color to create depth and dimension. Though Kent is quick to dismiss notions of specific formal references in her paintings, she acknowledges that images may become ingrained in her mind and reemerge as impressions, transformed into new shapes with mere traces of their original forms. "[There are] things I've seen in the world that carry a profound presence that I think I end up trying to bring into the work. They don't look like the things anymore but they bring that same presence."¹

For example, with *Procession* (2015), Kent's titular reference evidences her interest in movement and time. At the top of the composition, a repeating pattern of small yellow diamonds links two mysterious forms. Like most of the shapes Kent uses, these are ambiguous, yet familiar, evading specific recognition. While these shapes may subtly call to mind heads of hair, they are detached from any face or corporeal entity. In the center of the painting, a lavender cloud partially obscures an arch lined in white, resembling the entrance to a tunnel. The work then becomes an entry point for the viewer to consider travel, perhaps entering a passage into an alternative universe, a portal to another space and time. Science fiction is an important reference for Kent, who sees abstraction as a means to explore the possibilities of other worlds, and her paintings suggest the potential for elements from other realms to coexist with our earthly reality.²

In *First you look so strong, Then you fade away* (2015), Kent borrows lyrics from "Vapour Trail," a 1990 song by the British shoegaze band Ride. The artist describes the work as romantic, alluding to the soft, dreamy melody of the song with

obscured, semi-opaque triangles in a cool-toned haze. The clean geometric lines of the faded triangle dissolving into billowing fog echo the title phrase and evidence a tension between sharp and soft, which Kent often plays with. The pale, nearly pastel tones are sporadically punctuated with turquoise hatch marks and strands of blue bead-like dots.

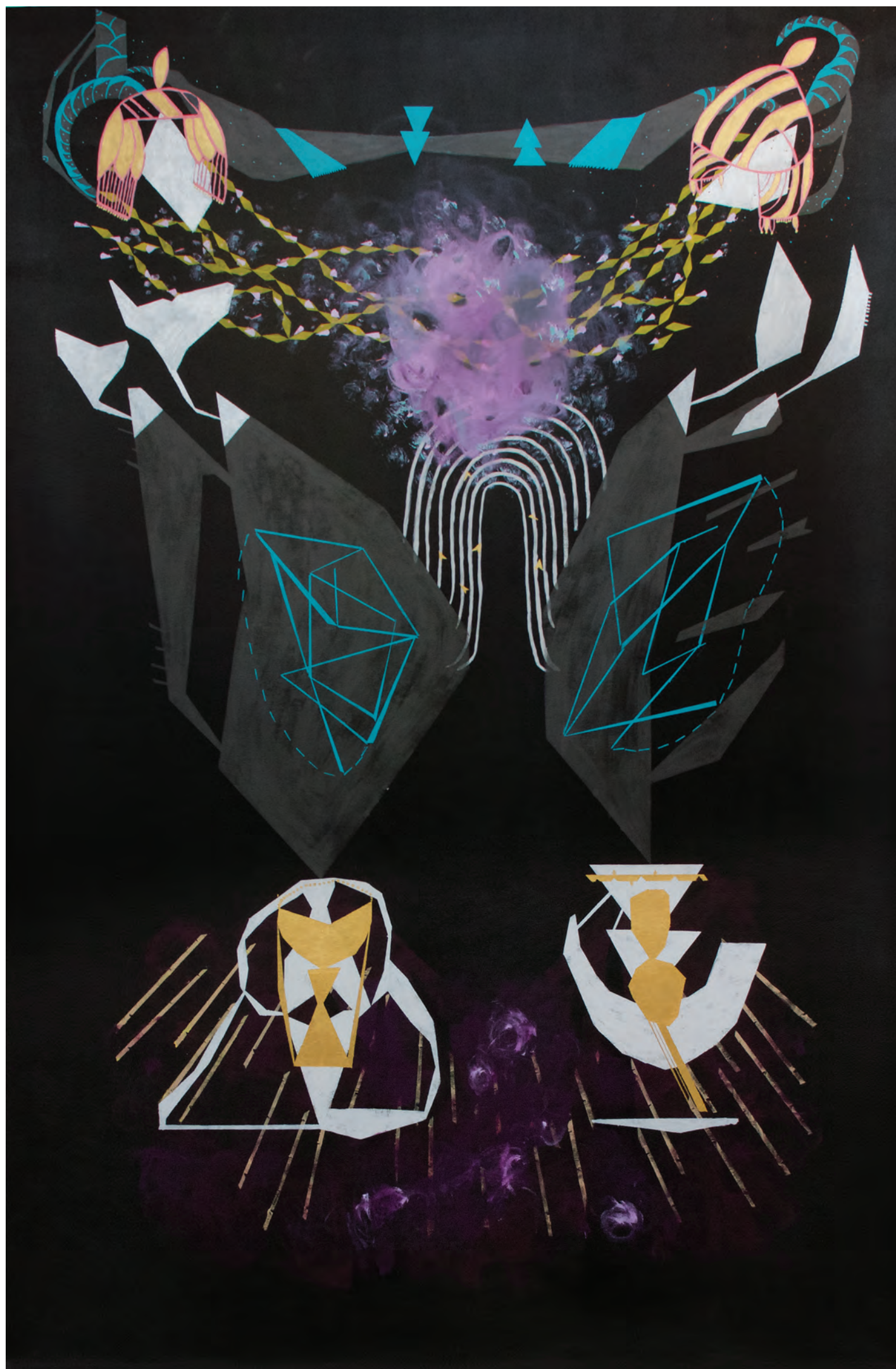
Kent's impetus for creating abstract painting began upon close consideration of foreign-language films. She recalls a period early in her practice when she was compulsively watching movies in different languages and was fascinated by the dissonance between her visual and auditory experiences. The artist was intrigued by the idea of a "spoken language that certain people are privy too but others are not" and wondered how this might relate to the experience of simultaneously hearing a foreign language, watching a moving image, and reading textual subtitles.³ In addition to film, Russian Constructivist collages became a major influence on her work at that time. Not being able to read Russian, Kent understood the Cyrillic alphabet on a purely formal level, rather than as semiotic indicators of language. She found herself relying on contextual clues and images to extrapolate meaning. Just as the Constructivists interrogated the separation of form and meaning, Kent's paintings explore the relationship between vocabulary and abstraction. Initially inspired by the disconnect between what is seen and what is understood, the artist's works hover in between, embracing ambiguity and illegibility in painting and beyond.

MIA LOPEZ

¹ Caroline Kent, personal conversation, June 27, 2017.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.



Caroline Kent, *Procession*, 2015. Acrylic on unstretched canvas, 108 x 72 inches (182.88 x 274.32 cm).

DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WORD, APPEARANCE OF THE WORLD

Un-naming the Gaps

"It is from the space between languages that images emerge. Each sentence is a way of looking at things, crafted by its speakers in a very particular way. Each language sees the world differently, inventing its entire vocabulary from its own perspective and weaving it into the web of its grammar in its own way. Each language has different eyes sitting inside its words."

Herta Müller

Chicago-based artist Caroline Kent explores the limits of language, the process of translation, and the joys of wandering "in the dark" in her otherworldly abstractions. Kent's practice embraces uncertain and cosmic spaces; the dark, expansive grounds of her paintings become sites for ideas waiting to land, converge, and transform. Through her experiences watching subtitled films, researching Cyrillic text and Russian Constructivism, and navigating unfamiliar languages while living in Eastern Europe, the artist discovered how the process of conflating images, icons, and translated words can shift paradigms and open up new worlds. In *Disappearance of the word, Appearance of the world*, Kent invents a painting language that serves as a threshold to an alternate reality or future—one that we can all navigate and translate together.

The artist's fascination with the relationship between language and image began in her early years. Growing up in rural Illinois, subtitled foreign films became a way for Kent to explore culture outside of her immediate surroundings. However, the experience of watching these films—simultaneously reading, listening to unfamiliar sounds, and looking at images—led her to become interested in the process of translation: how different groups of people communicate culture, and how we grapple with the limitations of words. Taking notice of typos in subtitles, awkward phrasing, and moments when the on-screen image seemed to conflict with translated dialogue below, Kent began to see great possibility in the gaps between cognition and recognition. When language fails us, we turn to image.

Years later while living abroad in Romania, the artist's experience of grappling with language and form introduced by film became tangible and immersive as she navigated an unfamiliar vocabulary and cultural environment. Not knowing the meaning of many Romanian terms, Kent began to take notice of other aspects of language, becoming more highly-attuned to how the sounds of Romanian dialect seemed to reflect, or be reflected, in the region's architecture and design.

The artist encountered similar observations in the writings of Nobel-prize winning novelist Herta Müller, a native German speaker who was born in Romania and continued to live there through much of the Cold War. Müller writes of the transformative role that images play in the space between languages, and how important that space is for perceiving and understanding our environs. The Romanian word for a swallow is *rindunica*, translated literally as "sitting in a row." The translation evokes the way swallows perch together on a wire, in a neat line; even the syllables of the word (*rin-du-ni-ca*) mirror the birds' behavior. "I used to see them in my village every summer, before I knew the Romanian word. I was amazed that a swallow could have such a lovely name. I became more and more aware that the Romanian language had words that were more sensuous, more in tune with my perception, than my mother tongue. I would not now want to live without this string of transformations, in speech or in writing. There is not a single Romanian sentence in any of my books. But Romanian is always with me when I write because it has grown into my way of seeing the world." How often, if ever, do we notice these relationships in our native languages? Comparing the artist's real-world grapple with Romanian back to our own experience of watching a foreign film: does that nagging feeling that we are always missing something, whether the accurate meaning of a word, a cultural cue or history, conversely mean that when we watch films in our own language, we understand fully and clearly? Or, is it simply that we understand familiarly?

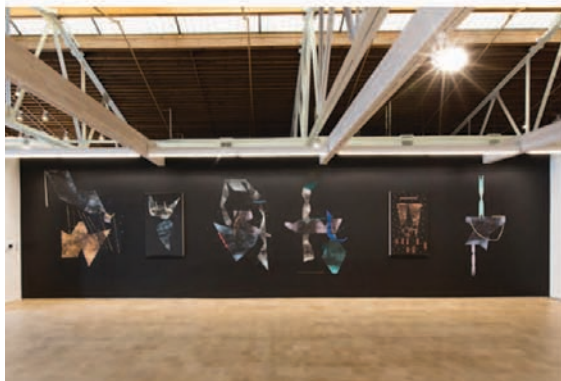
If the failures of written and spoken language create gaps in which we turn our trust to images, what might it mean to develop a language that is strictly visual? Though turned on to translation by cinema, speech, and text, the artist shifts to painting as a space to work out her ideas about meaning and the processes of language; after all, isn't it in the passage from one language or form to another that we can see the boundaries and limitations of each? Kent's current practice centers around inventing a language in painting, positioning herself and her viewers at a threshold between the known and unknown. In many ways, paintings are sites that prioritize the activities of forming and transforming over naming and identifying. As such, painting—really good painting—is always built in some way around the nameless, the grasp-less, the about-to-become, the "not yet." Painting, too, is a grapple. Before the advent of photography, Western European painting was thought of as a window through which the outside world was mirrored or represented; contemporary painting is still affected by this legacy. Caroline Kent enthusiastically chooses to explore painting's inside world. In the spirit of side-stepping a process where resemblance identifies meaning, the artist works by organizing compositions "in the dark"—literally within grounds that are painted black, and figuratively without a predetermined or representational agenda. In this manner, she organizes a series of shapes and pithy marks that seem to emerge from this dark expanse and converge into cosmic abstractions. The abstract quality of her compositions is very important for establishing access to these works. Though influenced by elements as disparate as Eastern European architecture, science fiction, Cyrillic film posters, and religious iconography, the artist's painted forms deliberately detach from their influences to create a level entry point for all audiences, outside of literal translations or objective comparisons. These compositions support a flexible semantic space as opposed to a knowable language.

Studying Eastern Orthodox religious iconography, Kent noticed that figures featured are purposely flattened as a gesture to separate them from us and place them in an alternate, divine reality. In this case, icons serve as image-based mediators between language and an otherness beyond the limits of direct description. These figures shift from being representations of individuals to an embodiments of the spiritual. Kent's paintings are sites driving lines of inquiry about how we make meaning, as well as thresholds to alternate states that exist between or outside of our language-influenced imaginations. We create words, symbols, and grammatical constructions to systematize and make sense of the things we already recognize in the world around us—to fix rather than transport ourselves. What happens instead when the invention of a system comes first, before or entirely independent of recognition? What in that case, do we learn about how context shapes language? How—to borrow once more from Herta Müller—can we train those "eyes sitting inside" words to see the things they don't know or can't yet explain?

Essay by Amanda Smith, Exhibitions + Fellowship Manager

Müller, Herta. "The Space between Languages." *Asymptote Journal*.

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/herta-muller-the-space-between-languages/>





MOVEMENT PERFORMANCE: language for the living

In conversation with the exhibition, *language for the living* explores the possibilities for communication within movement + dance. Using their bodies as the medium, performers will seek to create a visual language through gesture, shape, pattern, and form in an attempt to transmit information and ideas beyond words. Drawing inspiration from the shapes and structures found within Caroline Kent's work, this performance lives somewhere between realms, in the spaces within our minds where linear, verbal communication is no longer necessary.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Since receiving her MFA in 2008 from the University of Minnesota, Caroline Kent has participated in numerous exhibitions including the California African American Museum, Los Angeles; The Suburban, Chicago; Washington Park Arts Center, Chicago; Elephant, Los Angeles; and SUNY Dutchess in Poughkeepsie, NY. In 2012-13 she was a Creative City Making Minneapolis grant recipient. Kent has twice received the Minnesota Artist Initiative Grant, and is recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, a Jerome Fellowship, and a McKnight Artist Fellowship, and is currently a Fellow at Shandaken Project's Paint School. Kent is included in the forthcoming cross-institutional exhibition *Out of Easy Reach*, hosted by the DePaul Art Museum, highlighting contemporary and conceptual expansion of abstraction by female-identifying artists from the Black and Latina Diasporas.

ABOUT THE CHOREOGRAPHER OF language for the living

In conversation with Caroline's work, Kat Fackler has choreographed *language for the living*, which explores the possibilities for communication within movement and dance. Fackler is an Omaha-based choreographer, performer, founding member + co-director of tbd. dance collective. She choreographs and produces movement-based productions and projects throughout the community in collaboration with various organizations and independent artists. Projects have included ESP a music video for The Faint, *One Day, One Month, One Year*, a short film for KANEKO's 2016 Summer Programming, and the finale for Omaha Performing Arts Nebraska in Motion in Fall 2017.

ABOUT THE DANCERS FOR language for the living

Performers for this movement project, *language for the living*, include Dawaune Hayes and Alajia McKizia and tbd. dance collective members Kat Fackler, Stephanie Huettnr, Alyssa Rivera, and Annie Schenzel. tbd. is an Omaha based modern and contemporary dance collective founded in 2014 by a group of artists and dancers who wanted to create and perform movement together. With a creative process built around exploration and collaboration, they produce multidisciplinary movement based performances that seek to challenge perceptions of dance as an art form. tbd.'s mission is to foster collaborations with cross-genre artists, to encourage critical dialogue about choreography and performance, and continue the growth and support of modern and contemporary dance in Omaha.

Gateways to the *where*:

Investigating new territories in the work of Caroline Kent
Nicole Watson, Director, The Catherine G. Murphy Gallery

When I consider the current exhibition by Chicago artist Caroline Kent, my mind wanders back to last summer. Kent had a small, dazzling show at Company Project Space, a gallery in northeast Minneapolis. Titled *How Objects Move Through Walls*, the exhibition combined large, acrylic paintings on unstretched canvas with life-sized, free-standing wood sculptures that mimicked the geometric forms and color of her abstract compositions.¹ Smaller versions of these sculptures were installed on the walls. The artist thoughtfully placed them throughout the space, moving the viewer's eye from floor to ceiling and then from wall to wall. Kent's installation enveloped and surrounded the viewer, offering multiple perspectives from which to observe her abstractions. Her installations shifted the planes of her paintings from two-dimensional experiences to three-dimensional ones, with multiple points of entry: the work engaged the viewer visually, spatially and physically. Kent took this aspect even further when she commissioned two dancers to choreograph a performance in response to the exhibition, translating the artwork through the movement of bodies in time and space.² I attended the performance, and I remember feeling awestruck by how intuitively I understood the dancers' movements within the context of the painted and sculptural forms. When I observed members of the audience, it was clear that they were as transfixed as me. The artist herself gazed on in revelation: she stood wide-eyed, her head nodding slowly, almost unconsciously, in perfect rhythm with the movements of the performers. She was somewhere else, somewhere new, seeing something for the first time. We all were. What was happening here? Where had Caroline Kent's work taken us?

The *where* of Kent's work has become a preoccupation for the artist, as evidenced by the title of her exhibition at The Catherine G. Murphy Gallery at St. Catherine University. *Beyond the Kármán Line* references the scientifically understood boundary between the earth's atmosphere and outer space. It was named for Hungarian American engineer and physicist Theodore von Kármán, the first person to discover that the altitude of this boundary is not conducive to airplane flight. This is the place where what we understand about earth, and human existence within it, starts to change. Oxygen levels drop, weightlessness ensues and the infiniteness of space is imminent. The Kármán Line marks a crossing of territories, and so it is

¹ Caroline Kent, *How Objects Move Through Walls* (exhibition, Company Project Space, Minneapolis, MN, May 18-July 31, 2018).

² Rahila Coats & Tori Casagrande, *Caroline Kent: Spatial Patterns* (performance, Company Project Space, Minneapolis, MN, July 27, 2018).

with Kent's installations. Smaller acrylic paintings on paper flank wall-sized canvas paintings that dominate the gallery space with their scumbled, black backgrounds and their niche-like placement between narrow columns. These columns are marked by three-dimensional, painted, wood geometric sculptures that do not mimic the forms in the painting. Rather, they suggest familiarity and connection—a portal to interpreting the paintings in a different way. Wittingly titled *The Go-Betweens*, Kent's sculptures, which may not seem significant at first, allude to a new kind of space, a site with fresh possibilities for interaction. Kent is known for the way she uses nonrepresentational painting to explore the relationships between image and language; her current work seems to go a step further to investigate place as a new territory or dimension.

Kent's diverse influences range from Cyrillic film posters to eastern European architecture and the writings of Herta Müller, a Nobel-prize winning novelist.³ During a recent conversation with the artist, we talked about science-fiction films on Netflix and Kent mentioned the "alternative reality" of religious icons.⁴ She was referring to the stage-like setting she had created for her largest paintings in her St. Kate's show, explaining plainly: "I'm going to use this space to talk about this other space."⁵ My interest was piqued by this idea of icons—images—giving access to a new space that was simultaneously physical and conceptual. I decided to revisit histories of icons to see what they could teach me about Kent's exhibition in an effort to better understand her paintings as sites where meaning is derived and transformed. How did the artist engage new dimensions of time and space?

Art historians trace the history of religious icons to the Byzantine Empire and what would become Russian Orthodox Christianity of the first century. Later, they came to medieval Christianity in western Europe and became especially popular in Renaissance Italy.⁶ Icons evolved from the tradition of relics—objects of veneration that had the power to perform miracles.⁷ Relics were adorned containers that held the body part of a holy figure, or an object or substance that came into direct contact with the holy figure.⁸ In contrast, icons were small, painted religious images created by ordained monks. However, art historian Robyn Asleson and Renaissance scholar Debra Pincus note that icons were not merely a representation of holy

³ Amanda Smith, "Un-naming the Gaps," in *Caroline Kent: Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World* (Omaha: The Union for Contemporary Art, 2018), 4.

⁴ Caroline Kent (artist), in discussion with the author, August 30, 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Christina M. Spiker (art historian), in discussion with the author, September 26, 2018.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Robyn Asleson and Debra Pincus, "The Power of Icons" *Italian Renaissance Learning Resources* (Oxford University Press and the National Gallery of Art, 2018), <http://www.italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-1/essays/the-power-of-icons/>.

people and events. The authority of icons stemmed from the belief that their imagery was a literal recreation of those holy people and events, and as such, were imbued with the same transformational power as relics.⁹ Asleson and Pincus make clear that “a person venerating an icon, then, is part of a direct encounter: icons are windows through which viewer and holy subject make contact. Because icons connect to an infinite space beyond the temporal physical world, they avoid reference to earthly reality, to specific time or place.”¹⁰ Icons gave access to not just an alternate reality, but a divine one.

Kent is drawn to this idea of the image transporting the viewer. Like icons, Kent’s abstract forms do not “represent” words, objects, figures or ideas, though that doesn’t stop viewers from attaching such relationships to what they see in the paintings. For the artist, the interest in icons is their ability to link the viewer and the *where*. Her work takes us to a space or time beyond the image, beyond what we may know. The performance I witnessed at Kent’s previous show, taken in combination with her painted forms, has the same effect. Kent has remarked that “abstraction is of another world”—she is fascinated by the possibility of this other world, and by our ability to find meaning in both theoretical and physical places that do not have structures of signifiers to decode meaning.

In my desire to understand the intersection of icons and Kent’s abstractions, I began to contemplate the evolution of Renaissance altarpieces. Altarpieces, like icons, consisted of painted religious imagery. Unlike icons, altarpieces were often large, architectural, decorative and painted by trained artists who were commissioned by the church. They were made of hinged panels arranged within a wall-like structure, situated on the altar—the focal point of the church. Altarpieces did not have the power of icons, but they played a significant role in the sensory experience of ritual ceremony in concert with stained glass windows, mosaics, frescos, vaulted ceilings and carved stone walls typical of early Christian churches. The imagery, architecture and interior decoration of Jewish, Buddhist and Muslim temples functions similarly. The atmosphere of these spaces facilitates a spiritual experience for its congregants. Meaning is created through a person’s relationship to the light, color and sound of the space.

I could not help but think about Kent’s largest paintings—*Ceremony* and *A map pointing to a chorus set to perform a century ago*—in terms of altarpieces. They are not religious images, nor do they necessarily carry any religious meaning for me. However, they beckon interaction in a similar way. Our experience of these paintings is not limited to two-dimensional wall space. Instead, columns frame the paintings, allowing their presence to expand off the wall and onto the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

floor space of the gallery. The long lines, corners and cube-like shape of the columns are reverberations or quotations of the flattened, geometric shapes in the paintings. The columns seem to suggest tension with the curvilinear lines in each canvas; as if the columns' outward thrust from the wall can straighten the lines out. The small, wood sculptures appear to demarcate the entrance to the physical space of the paintings—the artist has referred to these as “boundary markers”—and they function like signs blinking “enter here.” Taken together, these elements open up a new experience of the paintings, a new place from which to consider meaning: they are gateways to the *where*.

If Kent's abstractions are akin to the transformational qualities of icons, then perhaps the architecture of the paintings—their situation in the space—is akin to altarpieces. Would these paintings have the same effect if they were not placed between the columns? I don't think so. The columns and sculptures are integral to our experience of the paintings, and more specifically, to investigating their meaning. And what of this meaning? What does the exhibition reveal about the *where* of Kent's work? How do we describe this new dimension, and how does it structure our interpretation of the work? I think this dimension has something to do with the murky mingling of familiarity and mystery, something simultaneously earthly and cosmic, physical and spiritual. It's like hearing a song for the first time, and wanting to listen to it over and over again, but not understanding why. It feels like *déjà vu*—the sensation of previous experience—but only parts of that experience surface clearly from the cloudy depths of memory. Kent's practice is the conjuring of a language culled from a territory at the junction of intuition, recognition and discovery. This is the place where I begin to more fully understand the language she has created.

Kent has broadened our experience of imagery, and in doing so, activated another dimension to perceiving her paintings. I'm beginning to understand what the artist means when she describes her current exhibition as “crossing over to a performance space where the paintings become the context.” For me, “performance” is related to the viewer's intertwined interaction with and interpretation of Kent's paintings. This shapes our experience of her paintings, expands the potential of their meaning and makes possible new readings of the abstract forms. Kent has demonstrated this can be achieved through the intersection of dance, three-dimensional forms, architecture, and, of course, abstraction. “Performance” is a window to meaning—a sometimes indescribable, intuitive way of understanding—that defines the *where* of Kent's abstractions. Their power lies in their ability to transport us to somewhere new.

JOYFUL IS THE DARK

Caroline Kent | June 2016



Joyful is the Dark is a selection of large scale paintings, works on paper and text based works that explore painting as site. In 2014, Kent returned to abstract painting after a 3 year hiatus, during which she pursued subjects of representation, narrative, occupation and presence through mediums such as sculpture, video and drawing. With a renewed interest in abstraction, Kent began making works that function as studies in an effort to define a painting language. This on-going collection, now consisting of 80+ works on paper, serves as a catalog that other works can be produced from.

One body of work that comes directly from the catalog are her most current large scale paintings that measure around 6' x 9'. These paintings are not only a translation traversing a shift in scale but also in form. Starting from an all black ground the paintings emerge out of a flatness of cosmic space and altered dimensions, inhabited by an array of illuminated shapes, motifs, and patterns. Pithy unrehearsed marks intersperse with stenciled forms that lose their clean registration throughout, producing an unrehearsed affect of slippages.

Joyful is the Dark also includes works that reflect Kent's investment in language. The literary as well as film subtitles and closed captioning appear throughout her work. Appearing in the exhibition is a vitrine, which displays a series of abstract paintings on paper with textual commentary accompanying. Dry, wry, and coy quotations provoke the viewer to connect word to image, but Kent's objective is rather to consider alternate potentials in the relationship between the two.

In conjunction with the exhibition is an essay by Christina Schmid titled *Close Encounters with the Dark*, a self-published text. This publication is still available at \$8/each, contact Tricia Heuring /tricia@publicfunctionary.org / to order a copy by mail or arrange pick-up at the gallery.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Since receiving her M.F.A. in 2008 from the University of Minnesota, Caroline Kent has participated in numerous exhibitions including the California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA, The Suburban, Chicago, IL, The Washington Park Arts Center, Chicago, IL, Elephant, Los Angeles, CA, and SUNY Dutchess in Poughkeepsie, NY.

Kent received the Jerome Fellowship in 2009-10. In 2012-13 she was a Creative City Making grant recipient. Kent has received the Minnesota Artist Initiative Grant, twice in 2010 and more recently in 2015. She is a 2015 recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant and most recently a 2016 recipient of the McKnight Artist Fellowship in Visual Art.

“Black steers all varieties of brightness into the shade, darkening and deepening lighter hues. Likewise, we can begin to see—through a glass darkly, so to speak—the random and formless as virtues. It is from this dark formlessness that Caroline Kent’s paintings emerge.”

— Craig Olsen, MNartists

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