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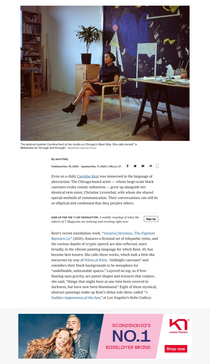
ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

An Artist Who Paints in Cryptic Pastel Symbols

Caroline Kent's canvases explore the power and limits of language — and challenge the modernist canon of abstraction.



Five abstracts painted Caroline Kent at her studio on Chicago's West 36th. She calls herself "a Minimalist through and through." Yael Malka for T Magazine

By Jack Mitz

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Even as a child, Caroline Kent was interested in the language of abstraction. The Chicago-based artist — whose large-scale black canvases evoke cosmic substances — grew up alongside her mathematician father, who would show her the beauty of abstract special methods of communication. Their conversations can still be so elliptical and condensed that they perplex others.

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Kent's recent installation work, "Triumfa/Strombus, The Eighteen Between Us" (2020), features a fictional set of telepathic twins, and the various depths of a cryptic speech are also written into her work. Her "Triumfa" paintings, which she calls "a language" she has become born known, like calls these works, which look a little like nocturnes by way of Hilma af Klint, "midnight canvases" and "Strombus" (2020), a series of pastel drawings that look like "unfathomable, unknowable spaces." Layered on top, as if floating sans gravity, are pastel shapes and textures that conjure, she said, "things that might have at one time been covered in darkness, but have now been illuminated." Eight of these mystical, abstract paintings make up Kent's solo show, also called "Triumfa/Strombus," which opens at the Dorfman Museum of Art, Inc.'s Art Gallery in Northfield.

Reality was very much pitched toward uncertainty, and in need of light, when I called Kent on the first Wednesday of November. Pan Dissing from her bright studio on Chicago's West 36th, where she lives and works, was in the middle of a pastel drawing, a cryptic gestal precision — a clarity that underscored her roles as both a teacher (at Northeastern) and a member (of three). The artist is also, she said, "a Minimalist through and through." Growing up in rural Sorling, Illinois — the daughter of a Mexican homemaker and a Swedish-American mathematician who "always absorbed the Midwestern work ethic early on," I grew up detraining corn," she said, laughing at her old summer job. At the same time, the pace of life there left her free to dream. "I had a lot of curiosity about what laid beyond the borders of a small town," she said.

The artist's pastel palette is inspired by her time spent living in Eastern Europe. Samantha Cadena Kent

Arriving at Illinois State University in 1993 on an athletic scholarship, Kent was a "jock" who had "no idea" why she was there to become an artist, but she would often linger in the campus gallery this early influences included the austere Russian Constructivists, hard-edged Ellsworth Kelly shapes and foreign films. Kent became enchanted by how a visual language could be universal. "I always felt like a foreigner in my own country," she said (she was raised in rural Illinois). "I was always a bicycle rate had to compass in order to connect. With abstract painting, everybody had the same starting point."

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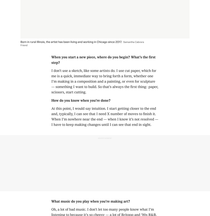
After college, she joined the Peace Corps, and lived for two years in Transylvania (then a Romanian province). Her assignment was to teach English to students, mostly the Transylvania, there were many pastel colors all over the place. It did something optically that I wasn't familiar with." She's lately been exploring another kind of language, that of the canon of Western art. Kent, who is actively participating in the discourse of abstraction, she said, she is interrogating a canon that has historically marginalized artists of color. "I'm interested in how I can be a part of that canon," she said. Its condition that "the non-norm of her work as a challenge to "the prominence of the canon," too, especially her tactile painting on paper, for which the bold painted pages into a typewriter, turning them into collages of text, color and stained intention. Like many of her work, the pieces are abstract, but they nevertheless seem to consider, quite powerfully, the nature of legibility. "Time will tell if my participation will matter," she said. "but I make as if it does." Below, Kent's answers to T's artist's questionnaire.



Kent began her creative process by using cut paper to bring forth a form. Samantha Cadena Kent

What's your day like? How much do you sleep? What's your work schedule?

Well, I get eight hours of sleep, that's for sure. My weekday starts at 5 a.m. I usually have a cup of coffee and read the paper. I have little ones in front of a computer in the morning. My studio is where I live — it's a separate room, but it's right next door, part of the same building — so I dip into it whenever I can find pockets of time. I'll find a studio that was outside the home during this whole pandemic, there is no way — I would be a mess.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

When I was a kid, I recall wise about myself in the third person and leave the pieces of paper around the house for my parents to find — they were supposed to be from teachers, or someone writing about their daughter. Of course, they were these aggrandized descriptions of "Caroline." That had to be the beginning of my practice, because I wanted to be called art, because they were meant to get a response.

That sounds like childhood satisfaction.

Yes, that's exactly what it was!

What's the worst studio you've ever had?

I had a one-bedroom apartment back in Minneapolis, many years ago, and I was painting in the bedroom, which was not the best idea, given because I was working with charcoal and pastels, and you don't want to breathe that stuff in. You don't want that in your living space. So that was probably not a good idea. [Laughs] I had to end that.

What's the first work you ever sold and for how much?

It was my first big painting from undergrad — it was a well-disposition piece that I didn't know what it was, but I knew it was strong, and it felt like it was the end of my time in undergrad. It was all downhill from there. It was strong, so for a curvaceous, it was a big piece. I was trying so hard to be a curvaceous. When I moved to Minneapolis, I couldn't move it. I didn't have space for it. So I kept it with my sister's neighbor, and I stayed in touch with her. I'm not sure if she still remembers I was interested in buying it, and I ended up selling it for $500. When I think about that today, I'm like, "Oh, if only I had that space." I wish I still had that painting.

Bice in rural Illinois, the artist has been living and working in Chicago since 2007. Samantha Cadena Kent

When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?

I don't use a sketch, the same artists do. I use cut paper, which for me is a quick, immediate way to bring forth a form, whether one I'm making in a composition and a painting, or even for sculpture or installation work. I'm a fast build. So that's always the first things, pastels, scissors, and cutting.

How do you know when you're done?

At this point, I would say intuition. I start getting closer to the end and I'm thinking about what I'm trying to accomplish with the work. What I'm feeling or hoping for the end — what I know it can manifest — I have to keep making changes until I see that end in sight.

Recently, Kent has been inspired by her Mexican heritage. Samantha Cadena Kent

What music do you play when you're making art?

Oh, a lot of dead music. I don't let too many people know what I'm listening to because it's so cheesy — a lot of Bergman and '80s Kate Bush. Recently, I've been listening to BBC radio dramas. I don't know why I'm so interested in that, but I'm. I'm. I'm. I'm. I'm. I'm better from my practice that I like scripts. I like the performance of language. And I listen. Sometimes the narrative sticks with me and sometimes I forget it because I'm working, but I just like the performance — I might be interested in the story or character because I get to imagine it myself.

I don't think Bergman and '80s Bush are cheesy, but what it's worth — they're great.

It's like Nice Dreks. Jerry Mulvey, Whitney Houston, Bee Gees. These can come right after each other. You get me to nap. It. [Laughs] I was listening yesterday to the Brontës. Sometimes I just have to turn on "Gigantic" by the Pixies — it's the most fitting song for how I feel sometimes.

Kim Deal is also a twin.

That's right! I thought of this when I was watching the video on YouTube yesterday — again, these twins.

Kent's "A Chart for Disfiguretement and Chance" (2020). Courtesy of the artist

Is there a mood you set on repeat when you're working?

Sometimes my friend Sylvia comes over and makes what I jokingly call "Swedish meatballs" for me, and I'm listening to Swedish music. It is a very specific way. I like the Swedish needle because it's faster than the spaghetti needle. It's the most decadent meal I could ever eat, and he's a great friend.

Are you imagining any shows right now?

I don't know if I should say this. I'm watching "The Walking Dead" for the second time. The first time I saw it was right when the pandemic was starting, and I was really into it, and I'm into it. I'm loving them. But then I felt I needed that extremely black. The show is cheesy but so intense. What it reveals is that the zombies aren't the thing to be scared of. It's the people.

How often do you talk to other artists?

All the time. Living in Chicago, the majority of my friends are artists.

Kent's "A Chart for Disfiguretement and Chance" (2020). Courtesy of the artist

When you're making your work, do you need to block out conversations with other people, or is that part of the process for you?

There are times when you're hearing a lot of conversations because you're in a community, and I'm interested in conversations and anthropology of those ideas. And so you don't necessarily want to block that out in the studio, or at least I don't want to. But there does need to be a point where I make my own decisions and my own choices, and those voices get silenced.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

Make big handwritten lists of what I should be doing. That's more how I stay on track. I don't necessarily procrastinate. I just can't — because if I do, I'll fall behind.

What's the last thing that made you cry?

The thing that makes me continue to cry is the unnecessary killing of Black people in America.

If you have windows, what do they look out on?

The L train tracks. Usually, I am the tracks and some trees moving, and then the train itself, which is very comforting. There's a Mexican restaurant that I can see from my window, and I miss it and now it's landfill. It became very empty during the pandemic — it had a ghostly feel to it.

What are you usually wear when you work?

One thing that's constant is this black apron. I get it a long time ago from a Lady Pepperpotting and I just kept it. It's so useful because of the pockets in the front.

What do you hold buy with most frequency?

Green painter's tape.

What embarrasses you?

Watching a video recording of a lecture I've given is really hard for me. I can't do it. But I'm always thinking, "Oh my, wow, cringe."

Do you exercise?

Yes. My father was an avid tennis player when I was growing up, and he's a long time that was something I was meaning to pick back up. I'm not a runner, but I'm interested in exercise because of the anthropology of those ideas. And so you don't necessarily want to block that out in the studio, or at least I don't want to. But there does need to be a point where I make my own decisions and my own choices, and those voices get silenced.

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Kent's "What the Stars Can't Tell Us" (2020). Courtesy of Kohn Gallery

What are you reading?

I'm in a season of not reading as much. The world is so intense right now; I need that break of just watching. And, when I've had a little bit of time, I've been watching films. I just tuned in to the Chicago Jewish Community Center film festival. And Northwestern has the Block Cinema program, which is now online.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

I keep going back to Ralph Lemon's "Scaffold Room" (2014). It's a performance piece, and I saw it at the Walker Art Center. It changed the way that I think about what happens in the space of a museum. Watching it, my feelings kept shifting from spectator to participant — because I felt like I was invited to feel inside the work. There was a lot of shifting and changing because of the intensity of the narratives, the different subjects that were coming into play. It totally rearranged my furniture.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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