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THE TRUTH IS LIKE A STRANGER

Kara Joslyn x Olivia Bax

In August 2020, Ambit interviewed artist Kara Joslyn for an online exclusive. The questions were asked by Ambit Art Editor, Olivia Bax and Joshua Miller, whose work featured in Ambit 230.

Ambit: We are interested in how your paintings represent familiar narratives. In the painting *Subj: Re: the expulsion. Body: HA HA HA. XO, Hel*, Eve has eaten the apple but feels no guilt. She is not self-conscious. Can you explain your interest in recreating allegory?

Kara Joslyn: I think allegory is a mode by which we analyze and understand images as artists and viewers; we are all adept semiotic analysts without even realizing it – we look for the story within the story, following nodules of cultural conditions. Painting as a history spends a lot of time in the allegorical. My “...XO HEL” painting borrows from a renaissance fresco depicting the Expulsion of Adam and Eve, by Masaccio, in which Adam and Eve look especially ashamed, naked, and afraid. Since I wasn’t raised religious I never really learned about the bible. My mum became Buddhist in the 70s after leaving her Italian-American Roman-Catholic borough in New Jersey and coming to California to start a new life, where she eventually got her doctorate in Psychology and became a clinical psychologist and hypnotherapist. My dad is a genetic research scientist and quite a devout atheist. I loved Greek myths and the American Indian myths. My best friend’s mum would tell us about eagles, coyote and ghosts. Paganism or animism seemed normal and these stories were engaging and magical. My mum comes from the Jungian flavor of psychology so I came to understand mythic stories as allegory, archetype – a reflection of the human condition; the pictorially imprinted collective psyche. So of course, as I got interested in the history of painting, that is really how I learned about the allegories of the bible.

My generation follows in the footsteps of a generation of feminists and scholars in California and beyond who were interested in RE-claiming, RE-examining, RE-contextualising, RE-covering, and Remembering. Re-make/re-model became the model, and the thesis: that this methodology is in response to erasure. That the history of women, native peoples, queer people, (really the history of everyone/everything except the dominance of rich white men), including the guiding genius of the natural world is actively occulted or suppressed in “History” aka mainstream education/culture.



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So, when I made this painting I thought about how allegory allows us to travel back and forth through time and I thought – what if we never left the garden? What if we never fell out of accord with nature's guiding genius, and yet still possessed human consciousness/knowledge? What would that look like? I remember in Art History class, we learned that there was a difference between “nude” and “naked” exemplified by Botticelli's Venus and Manet's Olympia – naked was shameful, nude was pure. So of course, I think – ok, let's reject the cultural ideology of purity, and transform that into something liberating. Her striped socks render her naked (not nude), but

unashamed, she is in accord with the flora and fauna in her conditional Eden. In my narrative she has a mythic email, delivered by a bird, about the expulsion. So, she sends a mythic email reply (the dog is handing it to her) with the Subj: Re: The Expulsion. The body is her laughing in the face of that proposition. Full of knowledge and her flora-fauna team, she is determined to stay in the garden this time.

Ambit: *Gatekeeper (trouble ahead, trouble behind)* is a huge painting of a paper figurine. What draws you to painting these paper characters?

KJ: That painting's image was personally resonant for me on a few levels – my dad played ice hockey competitively in his youth before he became a full-on science nerd pro, so I grew up around the memories of his foray into that sport as well as watching it and playing it (although I became a figure skater but that's a story for a different time), and so this goalie became a personally charged metaphor. In the title, I also reference the Grateful Dead song *Casey Jones* – a favourite of my dad's and also a condition of any crossroads – *trouble ahead, trouble behind*. As my favourite teacher Caroline Casey says – everything symbolic is everything real. In that vein, I think it's useful for me to see these images from mid-century craft books and just project all over them like Plato's Cave. It's much easier for me than making something up from scratch. I don't think I could make this shit up. I've always been more an appropriator, connector, shopper, forager, translator, than a maker-upper. There have been multiple images of these paper sculptures that I imagine to be “gatekeepers”. I painted a witch whom I considered to be a gatekeeper as well. A hockey stick or witch broom becomes a staff like any professional or metaphorical palace guard would possess. And in my imagination where I'm casting these paper sculptures to play roles in my weird mystery play, they become monumentalised and cemented even more so than the photographs of them were. They hold space in a way the actual paper sculptures and craft projects from 60-100 years ago could not (if they still existed). Paintings are loud, macho and sensitive – like rock stars in a way – they have their stage and the viewer steps back and looks at them from one angle – the front. I think in



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painting, it is political when you monumentalize something small and ephemeral, but also in my romantic view, I appreciate the allegory. What do I mean by this? Painting begins as a flat white rectangle. All of these paper sculptures began as a flat white rectangle. It's through volume, light and shadow that they come to exist at all. They come to life through projecting a story onto them. My painting practice is centered in black and white, so it is primarily concerned with light and shadow, and using painting for fooling the eye into seeing volume. In this way I can have fun with this "prima materia" idea – without the light we would not see at all, but without the shadow, we would not see form.

Ambit: The painting you have just finished in your studio is called *The Stranger*. What does he/she represent?



KJ: Well, first, I absolutely love titles — when I'm out seeing art, I always grab the gallery map for the show because I need to know the titles. It also really annoys me when artworks are "untitled" for seemingly no reason! Some of my paintings, I have no idea what the title will be until the last second, but with this is one, I started with the title idea and the painting idea at the same time. When I re-read Camus' *The Stranger*, I learned that its original French title, *L'Étranger*, translates to English both as "The Stranger" and as "The Outsider" – so some copies of the book bear the title, *The Outsider*. The Coppola film, *The Outsiders*, is a super epic American tragedy play about masculinity in mid-century America. My work often operates in the shadow of Americana, and within Americana, the character, "The Stranger" is generally an austere man in a Spaghetti Western. He's a man who lives a life of danger, to whom people say, "Howdy, Stranger. Mind if I smoke?"

WOW, how interesting that all three of these examples are about the absurdity of performing masculinity, and also the dangers that arise when there is an inability to perform normal societal roles. I loved that realization thread. Now, in other ways, you could say the stranger on a horse could be a metaphor for the angel of death. But I like to think it's a metaphor for Truth. And what I mean is this – unlike painting, photography is taken as an index, where painting is taken as a trick. Trompe l'oeil means "to fool or trick the eye". So I think of myself, or really the paintings themselves, as having the spirit of the Trickster/Redeemer character. In myths, a con and a trick differ greatly. The con-man does harm, but the trickster is liberating. Coyote steals fire from the gods to give to the humans. The goddess, Inanna, gets Enki, the tyrant god, super drunk so she can steal back the tenets of all culture for her people. If photography is the false index – the truth that tells a lie, I like to think of painting as the trick – the lie that tells the truth.

Ambit: You described your process as 'pre-photoshop'. Can you tell us how?

KJ: YES! My process is 100% airbrush using a methodology by which graphic design used to be done before computers. This was taught to me by an old-school graphic designer named Chris Polentz who was faculty at both Art Center of Pasadena, and at the cheap community college I went to before undergrad. He taught this class, "Graphic Design" which was strictly no computers allowed. He was dedicated to teaching us how logos and designs were made before computers – he himself had been a well-sought-after graphic designer in the pre-computer era. My other airbrush mentor was Ernesto, a really patient and talented cholo dude who taught the airbrush class at the San Diego Boys and Girls

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club. My mum made me take this class when I was a tween because she said I couldn't just lie around and skateboard to Dairy Queen all summer long. Thanks, mum. The Photoshop (and Illustrator) software were modelled after this kind of painting I am doing – mask tool, gradient tool, slice tool, etc. This kind of painting was made to be photographed and shrunk down – which is basically what happens when I Instagram my work. This kind of painting changes greatly in appearance when photographed, it's seductively flat and digital-looking. In fact, many people used to mistake my work for digital image. But this effect is by design as the process was made to become slick logos, posters, illustrations, technical manuals and all sorts of advertising materials.

Ambit: It was no surprise to hear of your interest in the Italian painter Caravaggio whose work is characterized by dramatic theatrical lighting. Your work is black and white and has a nostalgic quality but the titles and subject matter propel us back to the present day. Is this a way to invoke a timeless quality?

KJ: Yes! My alias and Instagram handle: @karavaggio! haha! OK, so, yes, in a way I am nostalgic because I am obsessed with finding meaning in the past and its mysteries – BUT I am not nostalgic for a bygone era in any way. More so, I have a postmodernist's longing for the lost origin of everything – when it truly aspired to be something, before it was conned and dominated and renamed.



Also, yes yes to invoking an aspiration to be timeless, but that timelessness, to me, also includes the future. I'm extremely invested in the tech aspect of paint and its chemistry. I mix all my own paints from powdered optical automotive-paint pigments, that have futurity built into their materiality. My grandpa actually worked with the company Optical Coating Laboratories Inc. (OCLI) that invented the "thin-film technologies" behind the colour-shift and optical pigments I use. The grey pigment I use sparkles with prismatic rainbow glints and the blues and pinks I use shift from totally achromatic to deep metallic colour, as you walk back and forth in front of the painting. People are probably most familiar with this coating as colour-change mirrored sunglasses or chameleon car paint jobs. These optical technologies are related to holography as well as being the purple-ish film you can see over your iPhone camera lens. I also use a paint made in England that was developed to mimic vanta black.

I'm a huge science fiction reader, and the aesthetics and concepts behind the imaginaries of futurity. I don't think about technology or the future with a lot of optimism, but it feels really authentic, to me, to be making stuff with a mix of past, and future.

Another reason for my chiaroscuro-ness (aside from being a drama queen), is moonlight in my work, night-time, and the kind of residual light you see when you close your eyes or if you're taking some trippy drugs in the dark – some shared hallucination. Painters like Bonnard, or Elizabeth Peyton, or Monet I think had this intense vision for what kind of light they want in their paintings. And for me I paint at night and it's moonlight.

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Also, I think Caravaggio himself was actually quite futuristic – he was the first reality television producer in a way – the churches would hire him because he could draw a crowd with his work. Why was that? Because he would paint the local townspeople into the Biblical paintings. I like to think of people going to the church and being like – “Oh look, there’s Gino the drunk fisherman as the Angel Gabriel!”

Ambit: Artists are already isolated but the pandemic is making our routines even more insular. How has it affected your practice, both immediately and in the long term? To what extent has it liberated or constrained you?

KJ: As Pauline Black from the band The Selector would say – “Too Much Pressure!” The pandemic, the civil unrest, the Black Lives Matter movement and the US election year have been a mix of liberating and constraining for all of us here in Los Angeles. The BLM movement has given us hope and a unifying story. The pandemic has unified everyone globally, but it is because it isolates and atomises each of us. Having the BLM movement has really given us that collective body back in spirit and presented us all with a lot of work to do both personally and politically. Despite being challenging and heartbreaking, it has really woke a lot of people up, and gave people permission to express their anger. For me personally, I have read a tonne of books, taken long breaks from Instagram, marched, written more letters and emails to my (coughs) government than ever before, missed my mum and dad, gone to the studio, studied meditation and ceremonial magic, gone on walks, hung out with my cats, talked to my besties on the phone, and fallen even more deeply in love with my partner, Conrad Ruiz (he is also an amazing artist). But at first I was like – what the fuck *is* making art right now?! Like how? What? Why? Perhaps that’s why I came back to Camus and the absurd, SKA music, Octavia E. Butler books and Roberto Rossellini neorealist films. Recovering the voices of artists dealing with fascism and authoritarianism in either their subject matter, their reality, or both.



Thank you for the interview, Olivia and AMBIT! I will end with a collection of wise words:

*All that you touch, You Change.
All that you Change, changes you.
The only lasting truth is Change.
God is Change.*

— Parable of the Sower, by Octavia E. Butler

Oh Bondage! Up Yours!
— X-Ray-Spex

*(We reply)
I know that my life makes you nervous
But I tell you that I can't live in service
Like the doctor who's born with a purpose*

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Rudie can't fail!
—The Clash

There is no authority but yourself.
— Crass

The truth is like a stranger.
— Marc Bolan

Kara Joslyn (b. San Diego, California, USA) lives and works in Los Angeles. She has a BFA from California College of the Arts, San Francisco (2008), Post-Bacc from Columbia University School of the Arts, New York (2011) and an MFA from University of California San Diego (2016). Recent exhibitions include: M+B Gallery, Los Angeles (2019); Bozo Mag, Los Angeles (2019), The Hole, NYC (2020), LVL3, Chicago (2017). Joslyn was a nominee for the Rema Hort Mann Foundation Emerging Artist Grant, and was two-time nominee for the Robert Motherwell Foundation MFA Fellowship in Painting and Sculpture. She has been featured in publications such as *Art Forum*, *New American Painting*, *Purple Magazine*, *KCRW Arts Insider*, *Juxtapoz* and the *East Bay Express*. Her work is part of public and private collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, The Barrick Museum, Las Vegas, and has been shown in numerous spaces and institutions. Kara Joslyn / <https://karajoslyn.com>