

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.