

Karen Andrews  
Inner Vision Studio

*Interview by Ruby Aver Thung*

**Ruby: So what is your thought about what you want people to experience from your artwork in general?**

Karen: When I'm making art, I'm mainly thinking about how to say something about this subject in front of me. But once it's done, I do want to share it. I guess it's really the most basic childlike impulse: "Look what I saw, look what I found!" Words just don't describe the beauty or depth of spirit that images have for me, especially if it's something subtle like a sliver of light falling on the side of a tree. I doubt the viewer will necessarily relate to the collage of feelings, memories and sensations I was experiencing at the time, but what they might receive is my intense love for that visual moment.

**R: It's such a pleasure visiting the Inner Vision Studio. It's such a colorful little building, and such a pleasant environment. Can you say what it's like to have an exhibition space in walking distance from your home?**

K: Maybe it's because I'm a Taurus that I love having everything really close to where I live: the studio where I work is right downstairs; my husband, Michael Costerisan, is a woodworker, and his shop is right next door. On the weekends in the summer when I have the Studio open I can just be downstairs in my house painting or printing on the computer, and the intercom will tell me if a visitor is there. It just feels like a very natural extension of my art-making process. Conceivably, I could go take pictures in the morning, print them by lunchtime, exhibit them that afternoon. Having my own exhibition space just speeds up the process. I don't have to wait six months or six years for work to be shown.

**R: What prompted you to build it?**

K: We actually renovated a former horse barn on our property a couple of summers ago, and put in some gardens and seating areas. The initial inspiration came when we went up to Deer Island, Maine, and just went in and out of all the artist-owned studios and galleries. It seemed like such a normal way to display and sell one's work, and it was like having an open studio event every day! I also have certain environmental sensitivities, and needed to create a totally non-toxic workspace for myself. So, a bonus is this is a state-of-the-art green building. There's no plywood, it's insulated with blue-jean insulation, we have bamboo floors, and used zero-VOC paints and finishes. Actually my Enchanted Forest series is a group of landscape photographs that I call "Souvenirs of a Healing Journey" through Environmental Illness."

**R: The space must give you a great sense of independence.**

K: I have enjoyed exhibiting in galleries, and still do from time to time. It can feel prestigious, and it's helpful to have someone else selling it. But I like the direct contact with people who want to see my work, and might be buying something. When you sell in a gallery, you are cut off from all of that. You often don't even get names of your buyers for future contact. This way I can talk to them; they can see

who I am; see how the work emerged, ever see locations that I have depicted . It's very fresh and immediate for both parties.

**R: So how has the Studio affected the artwork itself?**

K: I think I'm freer to do a variety of things the I wouldn't be if I were in a commercial gallery or mainstream market. I can show lots of different styles. In a commercial gallery, they kind of want to peg you as a "something" and it's actually a disadvantage to be both a watercolorist and a photographer. And on top of that I have several different styles within those mediums. With my own exhibition space, I have the luxury to jump around as my interests lead me.

**R: That's great, because it allows your different areas of work to feed each other instead to having to cater to a particular style longer than you might want to or to the taste of a particular gallery owner.**

K: I think that when you explore a little more deeply into the lives of many of the famous modern artists, many of them actually did a whole variety of things, but they only got known for one or two styles. Picasso was kind of an exception because he allowed himself to pursue a few distinct styles. A recent Monet exhibit at the Clark displayed some of his secret and undiscovered realistic drawings. I think it's a factor of the art economy that puts artists into slots. Either the buying public demands a repeat performance, or this one style is what the art historians choose to focus on.

**R: We know Degas also did sculpture.**

K: And probably lots of other things that we'll never know, but his dance and horse pastels are what get remembered. It's actually comforting to realize that I'm not alone in my need for diversity. I think it's just a very natural thing for any creative person to have lots of different modes of expression.

**R: As a ballet teacher, I'm impressed with your rare gift of truly capturing the flow of movement in a still image. Do you physically feel the motion as you paint?**

K: Well, usually I'll paint from a photo that I've taken of a dancer. As a very kinesthetic person, I do feel what I see. I may be experiencing where the weight is landing, or the exhilaration of the lift. I don't know if I can describe in words how I feel it, but I'm feeling the freedom of the body motion as I'm painting or photographing.

**R: I see an energetic perception, as opposed to just an outside aesthetic appreciation.**

K: Other movement people have said that, but I think it's just because dance and movement are in my being. I do love to dance, although I have not developed myself that way. An artist who also does some dance artwork once asked me where I did my research. And I said "What are you taking about?" I guess I get it.

**R: Your range from still life to landscape to dancers reveals a versatile capacity to observe and express. What is capturing your attention at the moment?**

K: Currently I'm working in three different modes. I'm working on a series of charcoal drawings about kids in playgrounds – the little interactions that happen between them. I'm focusing on some personal childhood memories, but I'm sure there are also some archetypal elements happening. In another series I'm working on the dance of light and dark as it plays off the figure. I'm starting with charcoal, and will be expanding to watercolor. My other work is a photographic landscape series that has to do with breaking compositional rule. I don't have any preconceived idea of what I'll be photographing, although I have a show scheduled for late summer with the Berkshire Photography Group. It doesn't always work to go out shooting with specific goal of finding something that fits a theme. I just have to keep it in the back of my mind that this is what I'm scanning for, and trust that those images will

appear.

**R: I love the work “scanning” as a visual arts concept.**

K: It's like setting a magnetic pull for a certain theme or subject matter, rather than deliberately trying to achieve something.

**R: How do you stay stimulated and inspired?**

K: It's tricky: there are a lot of things I have to do on a daily or weekly basis. I definitely do get into ruts and get sidetracked by other pressing matters. The best thing that keeps me on track is a little 4 x 5” notebook that I devote just to art projects and ideas. I also use it to encourage myself – I write down all of my art accomplishments for that day, such as “got to my studio” or “made three watercolor studies” Doing these lists helps me get going, and reminds me that I did do something significant that day. When I get ideas for new projects or images I write them down in the notebook, and later on when I have more time, I'll figure out the actual steps involved in implementing the idea. I might need to hire a model, or go to a certain place at a particular time to shoot something, or I might need to purchase some new material I've never used before.

**R: Even though you're really prolific it sounds like you have a lot of resistance to push through.**

K: Yes, I've really had to develop a lot of strategies to overcome my negative voices and discouragement. One of my teachers used to motivate me very effectively after I'd completed one try of a subject by saying “Do it again”. I'd do the whole thing all over, feel exhausted and maybe even satisfied, and he'd gently urge “Do another one.” Over time that got me in the habit of making three to five different attempts. Sometimes the first one is the best, but it's a great exercise in deepening the exploration.

Another teacher, Rosalind Gordon, who helped start North Street Arts Collaborative (the first Storefront Artist's Space) was very aware of the healthy process of self-encouragement. She would come up to you during class, and say in a loud voice “CONGRATULATIONS! YOU JUST MADE A GIGANTIC LEAP!”

She would really mean it. I was able to internalize this for myself and can now really give myself a few specific pats on the back throughout my art-making sessions. Art can be really hard – we don't often realize we've just climbed Mt. Everest, because the milestones aren't so apparent, and even the destination is sometimes open-ended. Plus, we're not Picasso, and may never hang in a museum. But compared to where you were this morning, it's a huge jump.

**R: That's an excellent way to discipline negative thinking.**

K: I always thought it would be great to have a tape recording of an art cheering squad running while I work, saying things like: “Wow! Great color choice! Look at that beautiful line! Phenomenal composition!”

**R: Are there other artists in your life whose work influences you?**

K: I go to museums and galleries fairly often, which keeps me stimulated and excited, and I try to connect with other artist friends as often as possible for mutual support and co-feeding.

For my photography, I am part of the Berkshire Photography Group, a dozen or so fine art photographers who meet monthly to critique each other's work and share technical information. Because art can be such a solitary endeavor, it's essential to have contact with my fellow travelers.

I'm also really enjoying Deb Koffman's Mindfulness and Drawing workshops on Saturday mornings in Housatonic. It gives me a safe way to just notice and observe my whole art-making process, including all the negative inner voices. It's been an incredibly rich and delicious self-exploration.

**R: I'm familiar with quite a few separate bodies of work – your Enchanted Forest series, your Housatonic hand-painted photographs, the Machinery images, and of course your dance photography and painting. I'm wondering how you manage to cover so much ground and what ties them all together for you.**

K: As an art history major, I did see a huge variety and scope of artwork, and so there are just a lot of different influences in my brain. I do feel I have many interests, and they change. Mostly, I think my job is to just be attuned to what's current rather than forcing something that has reached some completion. I think when it comes to the enjoyment of seeing, anything is fair game. I am seeing a few major themes that keep resurfacing like recurring dreams, so I don't think I'm just expanding endlessly. What ties all of my work together is some kind of love of the moment, an intensity of presence, a communion with the subject matter. I've transferred much of what I learned from framing in photography to composition in painting. I have a definite love of altered reality, or magical reality, a slight shift in the normal appearance of something. And I do love movement and gesture, whether it's literal or in the brushstrokes themselves.

**R: What I really appreciate about your work is this quality of movement and aliveness, not only when you are depicting dancers, but even in your still lifes. As a dancer, I have a hard time looking at artwork that makes me feel static. When I'm feeling stagnated or stuck and I look at your work I feel something moving in me.**

K: Thank you, Ruby. That's a huge affirmation. I think some of that has to do with the medium of watercolor. I use them partly because I am allergic to oils. There is something about watercolor that keeps you moving, because it dries quickly and if you go over it too many times it gets muddy. I like to complete a painting an hour or so. My training emphasized nailing my first impressions right away: the values, the shadow patterns, the richness of the darks. I try to keep my brush moving.

**R: So there's less control with watercolor.**

K: Yes. The first few years, it was more of a fight, because it's water, and it goes where it wants to. After, though, you figure out what consistencies of paint and water cause what kinds of effect. You can just set up the paint to bleed, mix and flow, and then watch it paint itself.

**R: So there are ongoing choices about when to interject and when to stand back.**

K: Yes, you're actually dancing with the paint.

*Entrepreneurial in spirit in everything she does, Karen hosts exhibitions every weekend from June through September at Inner Vision Studio, Furnace Road, Corner of Cone Hill Road, West Stockbridge, MA.*

*Ruby Aver Thung, former soloist for Chicago Ballet is now Ballet Director and teacher for Berkshire Pulse and Simon's Rock College of Bard. Ruby has been an occasional photographic subject for Karen over their eight years of acquaintance.*