

AT THE TABLE WITH KAREN LEDERER

An interview with Brooklyn-Based artist Karen Lederer by Kate McQuillen



Karen Lederer, *Cheetos Bowl*, oil and acrylic on panel, 24"x20" 2016

I arrived for open drawing with my sketch pad, some pencils, and markers, and looked around expectantly for the still life. As I hoped, the staged table was filled with toy wiggle snakes, Cheetos, LaCroix cans, and fish stencils.

I was fortunate to be at Karen Lederer's open drawing night at the Wythe Hotel in Brooklyn. Members settled in and began to draw from the arrangement, and each were given the opportunity to consider what these objects mean in Lederer's world. Her artwork walks a unique line between irreverence, humor, and pointed messages of the role of the contemporary female artist in America. "I'm here," it says, "and am sitting at the table."

That table is filled with Topo Chico mineral water bottles, watermelon slices, and ULINE frequent-buyer mugs, and also seated at it are such 20th Century Masters as Matisse, Picasso, Moore, and Hockney. In the broad body of work Lederer is developing, many of which are still lifes, these men are Lederer's character foils. Their images are now so part of our collective psyche that they have made their way onto our coffee mugs and tote bags. In Lederer's works, their masterpieces are now her possessions. She uses them for her own liking, confidently cutting up their pages in art history books, images of her hands and scissors slicing and collaging into their conversation, and making contact over the course of art history. Matisse's *Dance* appears, in the distorted wrap of a round coffee mug, and his goldfish are referenced in the form of a bag of the Pepperidge Farm crackers. Picasso's *Petite Fleurs* are grasped by the artist's hand, claiming the viewpoint as her own.

Lederer uses these tactics as a sort of poke that still pays homage; It is gently subversive, feels feminist in intention, and is reminiscent of the loving, who-laughs-last gesture of Rauschenberg's erased deKooning or Rembrandt's reworked Hercules Segers plate.

These pokes are accompanied by contemporary references that make us smile (GT's Kombucha bottles, Anthora coffee cups) softening the message as if to say, "Thanks for the tools. Now it's my turn."



Face Off, oil and acrylic on panel, 24"x20" 2017

KATE MCQUILLEN: Let's start with Matisse and Picasso. Give us some background on their banter, and how you're commenting on it.

KAREN LEDERER: Matisse and Picasso carried on a conversation throughout their careers. While there were often depicted as rivals, they were actually great admirers of one another. Picasso told one of his biographers, Pierre Daix, "You have got to be able to picture side by side everything Matisse and I were doing at that time. No one has ever looked at Matisse's painting more carefully than I; and no one has looked at mine more carefully than he." I often represent their relationship in my paintings by having a

Picasso sculpture look into a fishbowl, a common Matisse motif. In "Face Off" I present an open book with a Matisse cut-out figure on one page and a Picasso figure sculpture on the other. I cut a piece of paper above the book, physically inserting myself into their dialogue.

KM: As a printmaker, I'm drawn to the use of printed imagery that exists within your paintings. Can you describe how reproducible media play a role within your image-making, and the sense of personal ownership we have with masterpieces?

KL: I'm always intrigued by the current phenomenon of seeing museum-goers looking at artworks through the window of their camera phone. Even though professional images of artworks are readily available on the internet, people want to capture their own personal photograph of the art. That photograph represents the work through the point-of-view of the viewer and says as much about the viewer as the artwork itself. This desire to gain ownership of the work carries over to the gift shop where one can buy a reproduction of a painting on a t-shirt or mug.

Trained as a printmaker, I often think about the value of a reproduced image versus the original. Many of my paintings present a subject holding open an art book of Picasso, Matisse, Hockney, or Leger. I also often depict art posters, museum store mugs, and Picasso ceramics. In "After Party" a mug featuring Matisse's iconic painting "The Dance" sits on the ground with other leftover objects. The dancing figures echo the position of the goldfish in the bag. The objects speak to one another to create a larger conversation in the painting.

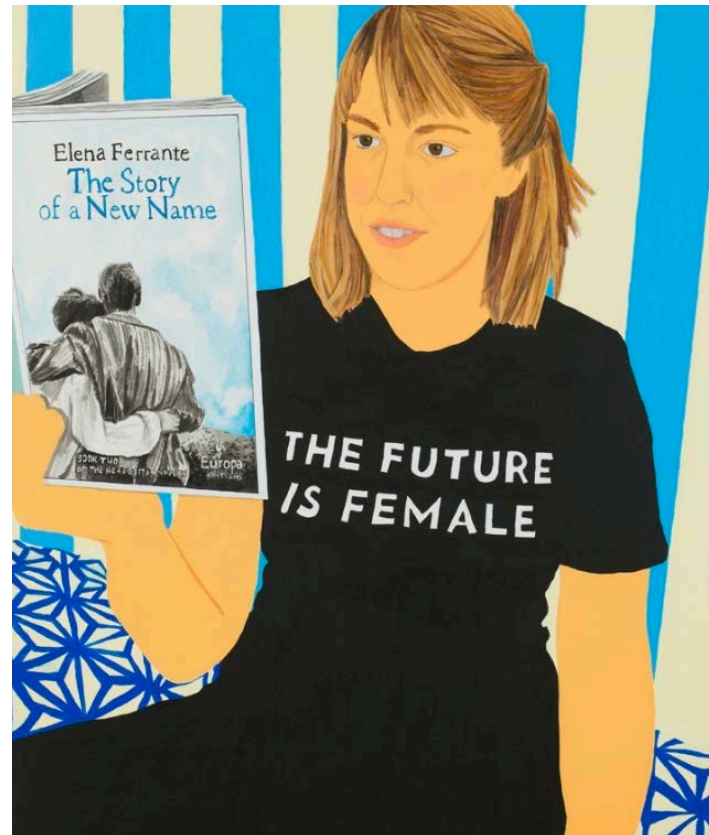


After Party, oil and acrylic on panel, 40"x30" 2016

KM: "Staging" seems to be a theme: still-lives, framing, and a repeated point-of-view from that of the artist. Or is the point-of-view that of the artist's camera positioned for an Instagram photo?

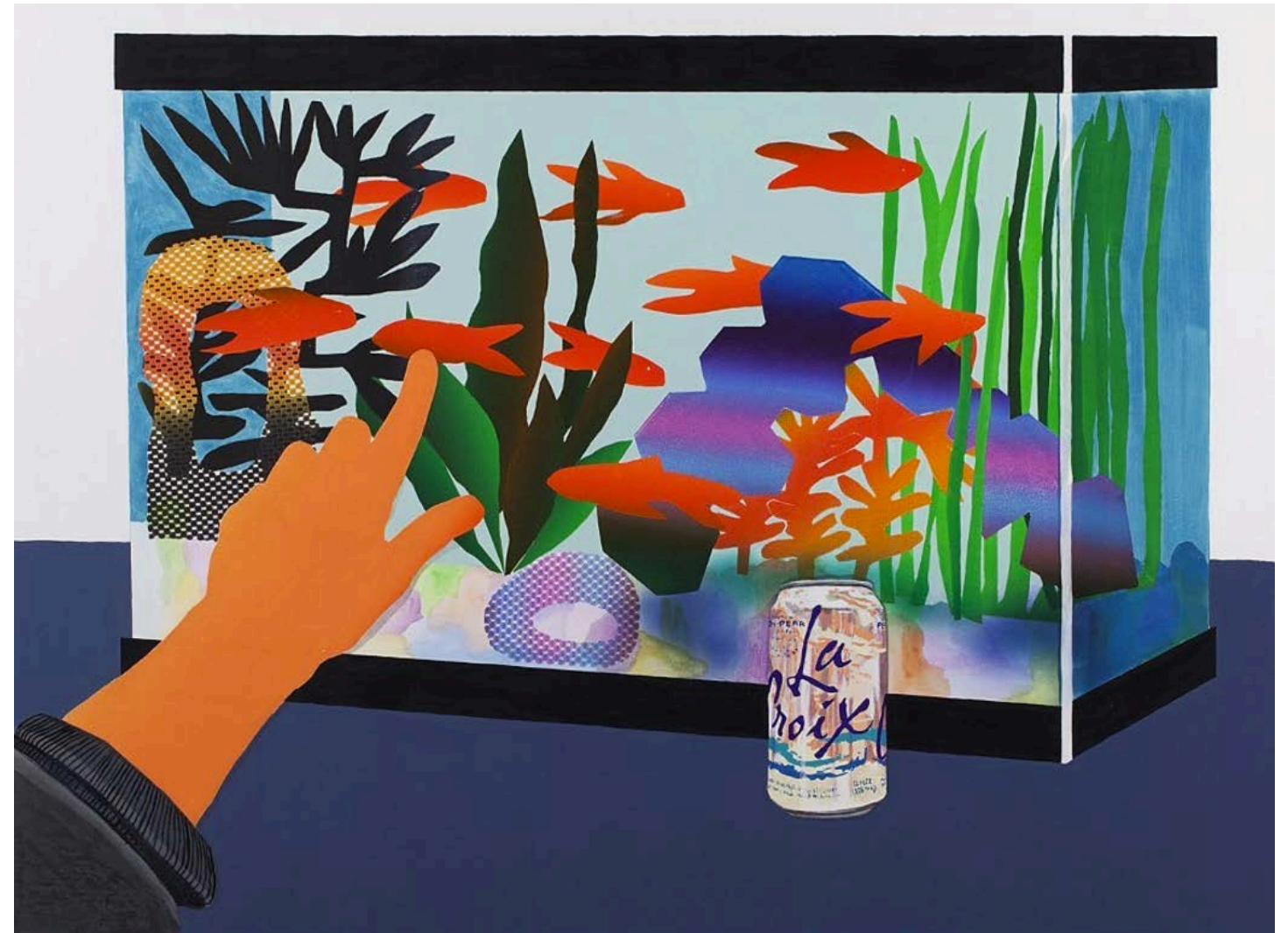
KL: Point-of-view is really important to me. Many of the paintings feature the 1st person perspective. An anonymous hand and feet, a bit of disembodied portraiture, enters into the paintings and asserts my presence and perspective. Like an Instagram photo, the paintings have a tight, directed point-of-view. The hand of the subject appears in the frame, while the other hand, out of view, clicks the camera. More recently I've started to move into a 3rd person perspective. Here the figure, at the moment me, is revealed more completely. In one of the paintings, "The Story of a New Name," I am depicted reading an Elena Ferrante book while wearing a "Future is Female" t-shirt. In another painting, "Hands Off" I am seen bent over an in-process protest poster. These paintings bring up questions of authentic representation in the age of social media and change the relationship between the viewer and the subject. They also mark a shift from still-life painting to figure painting.

KM: In some more recent works, protest signs have come into play. In this, I see reference to non-makers who have been inspired to pick up poster board and glue sticks before they take to the streets. Can you tell me more about how these works evolved and made their way into your studio?



The Story of a New Name, colored pencil, oil and acrylic on panel, 20"x24" 2017

KL: I've felt compelled to make some political art since the election of Donald Trump. In a time when facts are called into question and words can seem meaningless, I've found posters to be a really interesting antidote. A poster is a clear declaration of a feeling. I like their bold yet awkward aesthetic. Scissors and scraps were already a recurring motif in my work, so the act of poster-making fit in perfectly as a new subject.



Contact, acrylic and oil on panel, 40" x 30" 2015

KM: Technically, how does print play a role in your paintings?

KL: I build my paintings up through layers just as one would create a print. All of my paintings begin with a drawing. I then plan out what areas I want to be completed with printmaking. Usually these sections tend to be either super flat, have a color gradient, or a strange texture. I cut individual foam plates for all of these elements. After I print those plates through an etching press, I fix the paper onto a panel and complete the rest of piece with paint. I enjoy the challenge of making highly rendered areas sit well next to others that are flat and graphic. Recently I've also started to incorporate other drawing materials like markers, colored pencils, and watercolor. While the work appears collaged, it is actually all one, continuous surface.

In addition to incorporating printed elements into my paintings, I also make monoprints on paper. These prints tend to appear more gestural, and they often later become translated into paintings. I make the prints in a community printshop in New York where I also teach workshops. The printshop provides a social atmosphere in contrast to my solitary studio environment.

KM: I've heard you say that Cheetos are the most intimate of snack foods, due to the finger dust. Can you expand upon this, and the role of snack foods in your oeuvre?

KL: Haha yes. When you pick up a cheeto, it leaves your fingers covered in a bright orange dust. You have to lick them after you finish the snack. It doesn't really get more intimate than that! Snack foods in general ground the paintings in the present day. While the scenes might at times seem surreal, the objects pull them into reality. I also try to create a dialogue between the objects in the paintings, so that their packaging seems to take on an alternative meaning.

KM: There's a lot of work happening in contemporary painting, including yours, that seems to reference fundamental tactics of printmaking: shallow depth-of-field, distinct layers, and gradients. How do you feel printmaking tools are helping painters today?

KL: I think that's because so many young painters grew up in front of screens, mediation becomes a strong element in their work. I've always felt the urge to make art through a machine. In college, I quickly became enamored with the presses in the printmaking studio and in graduate school I learned machine knitting. I like the spontaneity that mediation lends to my process. The press makes decisions that stray from my intended outcomes and sends me in new directions. Printmaking opens me up to so many more mark-making strategies than painting alone. ●



Orange Dust, oil and acrylic on panel, 20"x24" 2014