



KAREN FITZGERALD: METAPHOR OF ENERGY

Karen Fitzgerald is a gifted and insightful artist who lives in New York City. Her work <http://www.fitzgeraldart.com/> is very much about energy. She captures energy and channels it into her works on canvas. In short, she's a great artist. Here's our cool chat ...

MICHAEL: Hi Karen, Your work right now exists on circular canvases as opposed to the traditional square or rectangle. Is this an exploration of circles as some sort of metaphor or is it simply a style thing?

KAREN: It's definitely an exploration of metaphor. After I'd finished my very first tondo in 1988, I felt as though I'd arrived "at home." I want to convey through the shape and form of a circle that one is in contact with language that is altered; like words in a poem. They are charged by the poem, the form of the poem. They are changed. When you look at one of my paintings, I don't want you to feel or think you are looking out a window. You're not. You are looking at a form of energy.

MICHAEL: For readers, Tondos are circular forms of art. Circles are so often equated with "Circle of Life," "What Goes Around Comes Around," etc. What's the strongest metaphor that you would say runs throughout these works thus far?

KAREN: I'd say it's the metaphor of energy. Most of us are familiar with the reality that energy and matter are interchangeable, of course, with all sorts of interesting by-products. I believe there is subtle energy in a variety of forms: the energy of dreaming, for instance or the energy of transformation. Color has its own energies; I'm not the first artist to explore that! The natural world contains a fabulous smear of energies - some embedded in things themselves: rocks, trees, animals, shells, places. And some are a product of a particular happening in the natural world, like the growing urgency during Spring or the quiet turning-in of Winter. Metaphor is such a rich terrain because like symbolism, there can be a multiplicity of "readings," meanings, and sure, energies. The way I work with paint is its own form of energy. As the paint gets thinner, it gets runnier and harder to control. But the fluidity can be water-like, a mirroring of the energy of gravity and evocative of the waters flowing all around us, and within us.

I'm hugely curious about "dark energy" - something the studiers-of-the-skies are more and more focused on. I like to think of metaphor as the Higgs-Boson particle - it's there, influencing all kinds of things and only on specific collisions, can we see it, alas, momentarily. I recently saw the new production, "Dark Universe" at the American Museum of Natural History. It was a profound experience - I left feeling like I was 8 years old once again. Higgs-Boson is theoretically linked to the dark matter and dark energy that many scientists believe to be present in large quantities throughout the universe. Mysterious energy. How exciting to know that we don't know all these things!

MICHAEL: Someone said that what we cannot see is more real than what we can see. Doesn't that give you such inspiration?

KAREN: It does! I was thinking about "invisibility" after our last exchange. So much science research dips into that category. The idea of "dark matter" being invisible - how wild is that? Typically, we can't see the "energy" of our interactions. We can feel it. We react and respond to it. But it is hugely invisible. In social interactions, that's where all our focus goes - to the action happening that is not readily visible. In one of the programs I'm working on at the school where I teach, we are focused on the imagination. It's a whole universe inside our imaginations. Anything can be in there. Our challenge (should we choose to accept it!) is to make what's in there visible, to say it in words, to move with it, to sing it to the sky.

MICHAEL: Absolutely. To me, your work really tries to take intangible and yes, invisible things - ideas, thoughts, perceptions - and give them some sort of artistic, physical expression on canvas. Hmm, that might even be a strong definition for art in general, No?

KAREN: Yes, Michael, you've nailed it. I like to think of art as a wide, large conversation. I often talk to artists who are dead - in and through my work. It's phenomenal that I might create a conversation with someone from 1,500 years ago, or from 15,000 years ago. I have always loved how art transcends time and spatial boundaries - another by-product of the co-equivalence of matter and energy?

Writers and musicians do this as well. I recently attended a talk by a wonderful poet. He described a book he'd published and how the inspiration for it occurred through Gaston Bachelard's book, "The Poetics of Space." Bachelard is long gone, but his very powerful ideas are still alive in the world, creating their own lovely resonances.

MICHAEL: When did you first become aware of art and that you would become an artist? Do you come from an artistic family?

KAREN: I knew by the time I was eight years old. But not with a conscious, linguistic understanding; that came a bit later. I was born and raised on a century-old, family-owned dairy farm in central Wisconsin. My Ma wrote before she married and was a devoted letter-writer throughout her life. Pa played the mouth organ (harmonica) when he was young; he dropped it and a horse stepped on it and that was the end of it. I remember when I was five or six, I was given a little basket. It was in September. I filled the basket with fruits and set it on a table outside. It was like a cornucopia, but I responded to it as an arrangement. In a few days, it was covered in black and fruit flies. Of course I was upset, but Ma patiently explained that the fruit was going to go bad and the flies were there to have something to eat.

I was allowed to roam pretty much at will. We had 160 acres. Our back 40 was all woods - a swamp in the summer and a wonderland in the winter. My job from the time I was 10 was to bring the cows to the barn at milking time. I would take my pony and the dog Texie and go get them out of the swamp. The natural world was a magic place back then - I felt complete freedom to explore it. All these experiences gave me an intimate sense of nature that continues to inform my work. To this day, it is a magic place for me.

In high school, I was blessed with three teachers who recognized something in me. They encouraged me to pay attention to art and the written word. When I was a junior, we took a trip to the Walker Art Center and I saw my first Georgia O'Keefe painting. I was very taken with her work and identified with her because she was a Wisconsinite. During my senior year in high school, it was arranged that I would have open studio in the mornings. I could paint and work on whatever I wanted, which I did. Two English teachers encouraged me in a love of poetry and I devoured T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, E.E. Cummings, Denise Levertov and a variety of other contemporary poets. I won a state-wide poetry contest and took a trip to Ripon to read my work, also when I was a junior. Even though I was the youngest in my family, I was the first to go to college. Those three teachers helped me figure out how to do that and I was off and running. I majored in Fine Art from day one. One of the three helped me find a job close to school and helped me think through the financials. I figured out a lot by myself, but their encouragement was key, as was my Ma's full-fledged support. It must have been painful to send her youngest out into the world. She wrote to me nearly every week and often enclosed a \$10 bill from her egg sales - both of my parents were afraid I wouldn't get enough to eat.

MICHAEL: Lovely. Boy, would I love to own 160 acres. Isn't it like a joke to see these FIVE acre estates in the Hamptons listed for like \$10 million (at least)? Now, you're in New York City where space is such a premium.

KAREN: Yes, open space is very important. Even five acres is a big piece of property. I have a garden here in Woodside (Queens, NY) behind our house - it's not terribly big. 18'x55'. The space shrinks and expands, depending on my intentions when I'm out there. It shrinks when I'm wishing to add a new plant (oops, no room; small!). It grows very large when I am down in the dirt, weeding, or just watching the garden do its thing (snails on the underside of a lily-of-the-valley leaf; huge!). Everything would have to change if I were to try to feed my family from this modest plot. Yet we have a fig tree that gives us an unending supply of figs for six weeks every year. And a hazelnut bush that is wildly productive - mostly it benefits the squirrels of the neighborhood. The garden contains an old rose that is the doyen of the realm. She was here when we moved in, and has probably been here since the house was built. Her primary canes are almost as thick as my wrist. She blooms all summer long, and is a sublime, soft pink, with an equally delicious scent. One year I had fresh roses from her on my table at Christmas time.

I maintain connections to where I grew up. My husband and I now own a good portion of the farm and I go back each year to a prairie garden and the woods. We are, after all, just care-takers of the land until the next generation takes it over. I plant trees most years I am there. They get a start here (oaks and maples that free seed, sometimes with the help of squirrels) and when they are a few years old, they go with me to Wisconsin; coals to Newcastle, as my husband so fondly calls this activity.

It's not a pleasant thing to discuss, but the valuing of land has become so terribly skewed. My family came into our farmland after the Connor company cleaned all the virgin timber off of it and moved on. They were advertising cheap land in Ireland in the mid-1850's and in the big Irish camp in Delavan, Wisconsin. What did they want with rocky, stump-encumbered acres, sans the resource that was most easily taken? Thankfully, we are becoming more aware of protecting resources now or at least thinking about a fairer way to share them. We still have a long way to go. Nothing from the land is "free," but many people don't comprehend that. Last year, some students I was working with chose this quote as a basis for a mural project,

"When the power of love overcomes the love of power then the world will know peace." -Jimi Hendrix

Metaphorically, love and power seem to herald the same intertwining that matter and energy do, with equally explosive potential when one is transformed to the other. It seems like humankind will be around a very long time; until we figure out how to navigate power and money, I can't imagine the world imploding in a cosmic shift. I think we are meant to "grow up" around some of these basic issues. So the game goes on!

What would you do with a plot of land if you had one? My generation has witnessed the passing of the family farm - there are acres and acres undergoing a slow transition from farmland. On the road where our farm is, there used to be a dozen functioning farms. Now there are two.

MICHAEL: The changing generations of a family farm really makes me think again about your work and the ethereal, evolving nature of it. Hmm, nature! Your work seems to also have a strong nature vibe.

KAREN: Thanks, Michael. I do think there is an evolution in one's work. I see it in mine. I'm wondering how your work has evolved? Can you spot new ideas that have presented themselves in your writing? Or perhaps it is that the work adjusts itself to each new project?

The urge toward gilding was a big change for me. While I was pleased with some tree paintings I'd been doing in '04 - '06, I still felt I was missing some key energy that I perceived when out amongst the trees. I'm not there yet, but maybe someday I'll be able to make a painting of a tree that really says what I want to say about them. I think they are some of the most amazing things on our planet.

MICHAEL: I'm not sure my writing evolves, but I do and the writing reflects that. I totally agree with you about trees. Nearly every place that I've lived, I've planted a tree. I've even written an essay called, "Trees," that I haven't published yet. Moving on, what do you think about the art world/art market and now they function? Deceased, famous artists are thriving while living artists are striving.

KAREN: Well, it's definitely an evolution! The art market or at least the most visible part of it seems to function for itself. It does not seem to be for artists. Maybe it's like how gravity bends space and time. Messing with the equation of art-to-money has created this heavy thing that has skewed the conversation. Now the energy/matter field of artists is bent out of whack wherever it encounters the art/money system. Prices for much of the work at the top end are wildly skewed, way out of balance and impressively overpriced. But that's only one part of the market. Many people have evolved to the point where they recognize that owning good work is important to them and they are willing to spend within their budgets. Sometimes that's only a few hundred bucks. But with a bit of effort, wonderful, fine work can be found in that price range.

The buyers I've met lately are purchasing work with a genuine interest and for wider reasons than gaming the system. I think of the numbers of people who began buying and "flipping" houses not so long ago. There probably are still "art flippers" out and about, but from my experience, people engage with my work because they love it, they are attracted to the energy embedded in the work, not the energy of the economy that contextualizes the work.

MICHAEL: That's so interesting. I think we forget that the energy and focus that we put into something helps define the final product in a positive or negative way. Quite interesting.

KAREN: Not so long ago, I used to get very distressed about the market. I'd read some article about another over-the-top exhibit or something created to obviously sit at the top of the innovation heap and I'd literally roll my eyes. It felt endlessly exasperating, certainly not something I'd signed up for. **But over time, I've realized that these things have very little to do with me or my work.** I don't innovate for the sake of innovation. I don't go to, nor do I support, over-the-top exhibition efforts. The flash and dash at the top end is just a lot of very public thrashing around of a system that has exhausted its potentiality. It's done, broken and boring. While this is my, admittedly singular, viewpoint, it has allowed me to flourish as an artist.

The market is a very dynamic place. It is changing rapidly. The idea that was embedded in my education as an artist was to find a gallery and the rest would be taken care of. This is a total myth. Artists are really small businesses. The more I think of myself and my work in this way, the more my sales increase. Just as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol taught us that there are no rules in the creation game, the big honcho galleries are teaching us that there are no rules in the marketing game. We are seeing regular press these days that address many of the flaws and impossibilities within the market system. The New York Times recently published two pieces that address aspects of the system that fail most artists.

MICHAEL: Wow. Well said. Finally Karen, where do you want to go with your own work and what's the point of art anyway? Shouldn't we really be discussing an end to economic turmoil or a cure for cancer? What can art do?

KAREN: Art may very well cure cancer. How do we know it won't? Other implausible things have surprised us in the past, and will do so in the future! The world is not a mono-culture. Its hierarchies are all local. Solving economic turmoil might be a focus here, but elsewhere amassing a stupendous collection of feathers might be more important. The language and culture of art transcends all boundaries. Well, okay, I can think of one it does not. Still, I can have a conversation with an Aboriginal dreamer even though we have never met. The perfect point of art is precisely how useless it is. A big mistake is made when someone doesn't see beyond the lack of utility. Pull back that curtain and it's

startling how much and how quickly the world expands. Being useful has a very short shelf life. There are all sorts of things in the world that seem so useless - in the universe, too. Take ants, for instance. What is their purpose? Maybe just to have us "discover" how their world is organized. We aren't talking about anything centralized here!

The work is always evolving. I hope one day it communicates in a crystal clear voice and with a humble power that persuades, comforts, enlightens and brings joy. I hope that as I age, the work will be there to support me. I feel at peace with the web of inter-connectedness that my work produces. I don't need to know it completely, but I do know it's there. The linkages come into focus a few at a time and when they do, I always find myself and my work at some new intersection. Creating art is a wonderful way to be in sync with the continuum of change that is alive in this living, breathing universe. What a pleasure it has been talking with you!

MICHAEL: Thanks Karen. The pleasure has been mine. By the way, I saw a documentary about ants on the Discovery Channel years ago. It focused on this mound of extremely busy ants ... thousands of them. The narrator said that when we see ants doing their thing, there is NO LEADER in charge. All of the ants know their job and simply go about doing it. That makes THEM far more advanced than us, No? LOL.

KAREN: Many, many thanks, Michael. My allusion to ants was from a talk I heard on Radiolab- locally here in NYC on WNYC. It was fascinating. They talked to several scientists that related the development of ant colonies to the development of neighborhoods. I love the kinds of questions scientists ask. It is true there is no leader in ant colonies. They do what they do based on following the scent of pheromones. The field of study is called Emergence. They ultimately connected it to an area of our brain that receives more neural traffic than any other area. Our brains produce what they produce also along the idea of emergence. Neighborhoods grow because one person who is passing through stops and sooner or later, others stop, usually for similar reasons. The 'hood' accrues through these individual stoppages and often a whole city will form. Not because one person decided a neighborhood or city should be there or a higher conscious power in our brains, but because of an accruing process. There is no one ant that has the master plan of a colony.

I suspect art follows some of these same patterns and extending the idea/argument a bit further, human development, cultural evolution is also an "emergent" concept. It would be fun to construct a "pheromone map" of cultural evolution!

MICHAEL: Karen, I think we're getting that party started right here and now. Hmm, I wonder how many people are reading this?

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