



Karen Heagle's studio views with Side of Beef on the left, and her studio desk on the right

## Karen Heagle

### A Studio Visit to Sunset Park, Brooklyn

by Jeanne Wilkinson

I've known Karen Heagle since my undergraduate days in Wisconsin. We were both art students at UW-Stout in a town – Menomonie – that grew to twice its size when school began in the fall. I went to New York first, to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and she came a little while after I'd gotten my MFA, for the same purpose. We both stayed in New York to follow our bliss, or if not bliss, our mutual obsessions.

I see Karen often at her day job womaning the desk at the Matthew Marks Gallery on 22nd Street in Chelsea, but a while back I got the opportunity to see her in her natural environment, her studio in the Sunset Park area of Brooklyn not far from the beautiful Greenwood Cemetery. She works in one of those big buildings that rents to artists until the market outprices them. This is the way it always works: artists need space so they find studios in a less expensive area of the city, less expensive because

it's dangerous and/or full of trashy abandoned buildings. But as night follows day, as soon as the artists clean the place up and settle in, the real estate people invade, capitalizing on the activity and good energy by bringing in the rich and trendy who are not creators but money-makers, and who, for the most part, won't buy the work of the artists they're supplanting but will instead go to the auction houses and invest in something that will prove them rich and, they hope, make them richer.

Which is something many if not most artists aren't: rich. Karen, however, has carved herself a niche that is full of creative light and at the same time generating enough financial remuneration to keep her in a Brooklyn studio and making work. She is now making art that is investible. She currently exhibits her work at Churner and Churner Gallery in Chelsea, she has a painting in the Saatchi Collection and her career is being followed by, say, Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith in *The New York Times*.

I remember her work in undergraduate school as being brash and figurative and somehow

tender. There was humor in it, but not overt; not amusement so much as bemusement. Kind of like, well, we humans are a more than a bit crazy but here we are with our deer heads and superheros and fake-wood paneling, all of our various vanities/vanitas on display, and well, there you go. There were a lot of people in that school who loved thinking of themselves as seriously creative souls embodying seriously creative urges, but Karen didn't think of herself that way, she was that way. Much of the faculty was steeped in mid-20th century teaching traditions of not teaching at all but letting the inner artist reveal itself, and Karen's inner artist was someone they weren't all that familiar, or comfortable, with. But by and large they let Karen be Karen: autobiographical, awkward, sincere, searching and somehow fierce under her unassuming, Clark Kent-ish appearance.

In graduate school the faculty was perhaps less gentle, but they simply served to make her more herself. She had an obsession with Xena the Warrior Princess for a while, and not in an ironic way, but with a true belief in the power of a woman to be everything

that Xena symbolized: strong, sexy, magical, gay, taking on the turbulence and troubles of life with grace and a finely honed inner fire. Angry when appropriate, joyful when possible, and working, working, working. Being gay is an integral part of Karen's life, as is being a feminist, and in some of her work I see the eyes of a young girl with her particular proclivities trying to make sense of a world formed and shaped by male tenets and priorities: the dead trophy deer, the hanging rabbit, the predatory bird, the suit of armor, the wood-paneled den. Growing up in the airless, immovable patriarchal structures of rural America, a figure like Xena must have been a revelation, a way out, a primer on how to be a star in your own life rather than a bit player whose lines were written for you long ago.

Contrary to the romanticised ideologies of Americana, the rural world by and large doesn't value life and growth as much as it values control over life and growth. If you have weedy impulses, best to escape.

Which Karen did. Her studio itself is rich ground, a place of active exploration. On the walls hangs completed work and work in progress,

sketches, visual ideas, framed paintings, articles of interest. Some artists manage to make their studios look like showcases during open studio events, with all the detritus of the creative process hidden from view. But this is a working studio, a place of vision – literally – with evidence of the kind of ordered, unavoidable chaos that suggests a working engine of creation.

Karen Heagle seems to spring from earlier roots than her rural background would indicate: she is a gatherer like women of yore, collecting and processing not foodstuffs but images that appear along her life's path. She uses data from pop culture – superheros, muscle-bound men, big-breasted women – but she strips Pop of its deadpan flatness and denial and gives us instead something actively humming. Nudes, birds (including vultures) a manatee, slices of watermelon, faces, portraits, a side of beef ala Chaim Soutine and Rembrandt, an armored man – all of these surround us in the studio, some glowing with patches of shimmering gold leaf. Yet despite bright colors and gold sheen, I sense something ominous in her work, something

closing in and ready to pounce if we are foolish enough to call attention to ourselves. Vultures with their ancient stony eyes mill about, eternally patient and self-assured. Like in the Dutch still lifes that she references, I sense decay and corruption lurking inside the lure of beauty: the watermelon bursting red and overripe; the hanging beef carcass gilded and garish. I feel the threat of being lost inside the burning animal world, or trapped inside shining armor like a faceless Medieval knight.

And then these dark things skitter away, go into hiding, taking with them their deeper meanings and leaving behind a facade of color and shape that looks like reality but actually camouflages it. Looking at Karen Heagle's work in her studio, I am reminded of *The Life of Pi*, toward the end of the book when the author via his protagonist makes us wonder about the fiction of his fiction, about the "true" identities of the creatures on his boat in the middle of the sea, leaving us to marvel at the kinks and wrinkles of the mind and to ponder the meaning of appearances versus what lies beneath.



Karen Heagle, *Three Vultures and Deer Carcass*, 2013, acrylic, ink, collage, gold and copper leaf on paper, 51.5" x 63"



Karen Heagle in her studio with *Manatee* on the top right