



BADINAGE
Mixed Media:

A CONVERSATION WITH ARTIST KAREN PARKER LEARS

Jennifer L. Geddes

Editors' note: The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia will host a gallery of Karen Parker Lears's artwork from the series "Swansquarter: The Wound-Dresser's Dreaming" in Fall 2010.

Karen Parker Lears is an artist and an Associate Editor of *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*. She created collage "metaphorical illuminations" for the book *Women Writers of Latin America: Intimate Histories*. Trained as a biologist, she has worked in laboratories at Yale and Chapel Hill.



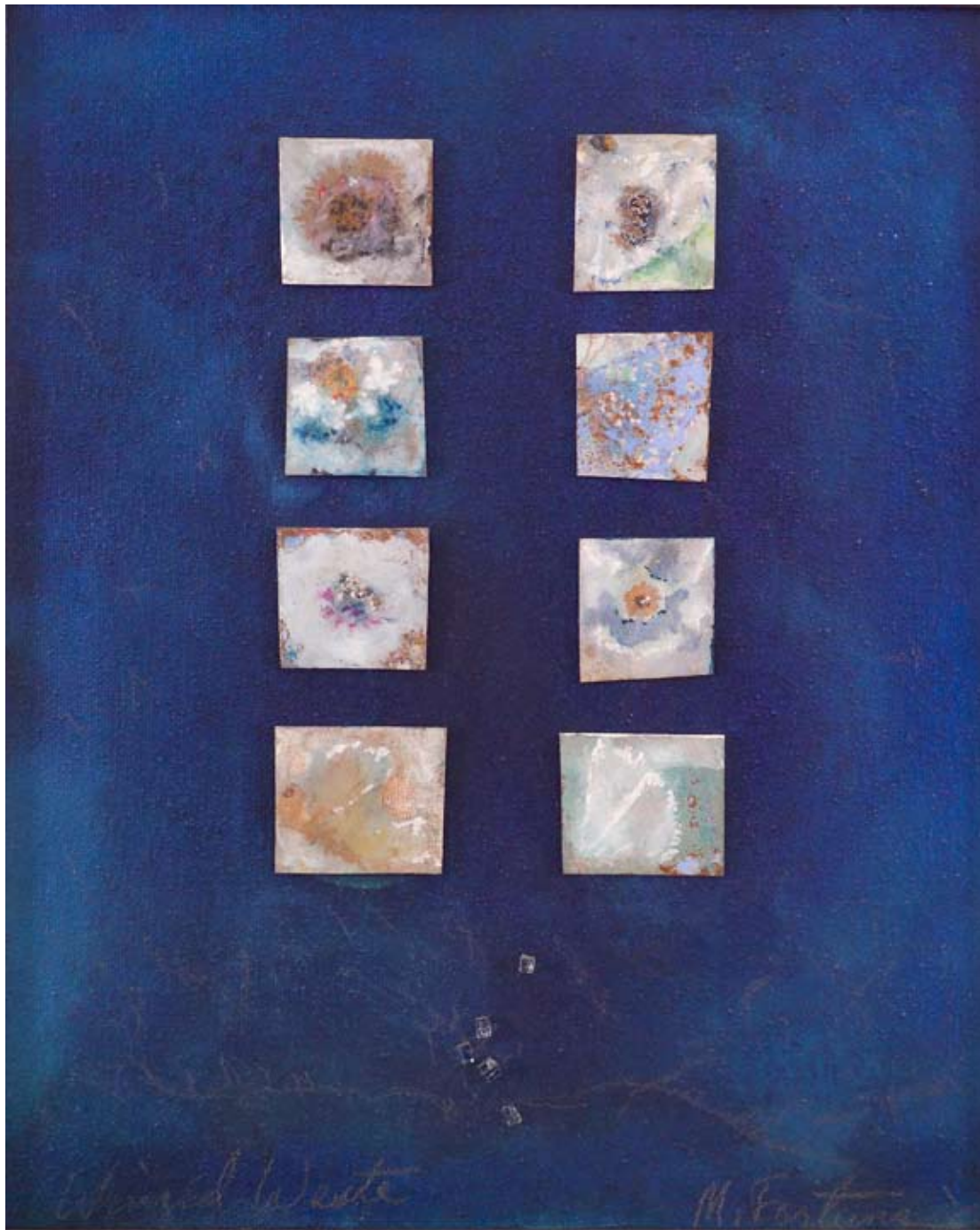
DEAD RECKONING—THE BIG OPEN
Mixed Media:

THR: You have worked as a biologist, an intern at an Army hospital during the Vietnam War, and now an editor at *Raritan*. How have these different roles shaped you as an artist?

KPL: I was raised on the Lynnhaven River in Virginia, and my idea of fun was to find a fish, bury it, and dig it up weeks later to see what had happened to it. It was a very material kind of play and very keyed into observation and process. I would often ask my mother to pick up a fish if she was going to the grocery store. I was fascinated with swim bladders, which allow fish to rise or sink in the water. She would get fish that had all their organs intact, and I would go into the laundry room and cut them up.

But I found when I got to college that these were almost nineteenth-century preoccupations and that the molecular biological revolution was well underway. I began to realize that I was a biologist out of time. I didn't really want to work in labs; I could pretty much only see my way forward in terms of some kind of medical work. The opportunity came to do an internship at the Valley Forge Army Hospital. It was 1968, and this was a major hospital for American soldiers with some of the most horrendous damage from the Vietnam War.

I did eventually become something of a biologist in labs, but soon after finishing college, I met a woman who was an artist, and that kind of work was something of a revelation—the handwork, the deep materiality, and the freedom you have to pursue the accidental, the unexpected. My studio is partly a kind of kitchen/lab.



WINGED WASTE
Mixed Media:

THR: Could you tell us a little about your series of works entitled “Swansquarter: The Wound-Dresser’s Dreaming”?

KPL: For years I had been working on canvases as memory palaces, memory theater, which were in the tradition of ancient techniques for enhancing memory and imagination. My memory palaces and theaters were made using very particular imagery, often tied to lost or distant family members I desired to hold onto. I have always felt that the *particular* and the *abstract* were not opposites but complementary to one another. Eventually I found myself artistically moving away from those remembered particulars toward a more abstract representation of interior states of loss. I had witnessed great suffering in my immediate family. The Swansquarter project grew out of an insistent question: what do we do in the presence of wounds, of all kinds? It picked up urgency in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq, and my personal need to address the costs that were not being talked about: the wounds to soldiers and civilians, the cost to the flesh, to the mind and spirit, to families, and to the larger community and culture. These seemed like issues not only for the wounded but also for the person who was standing by. And all of us were, in a sense, standing by.

I wanted to address wounds from the perspective of the wound tender. The works in “Swansquarter: The Wound-Dresser’s Dreaming” are material meditations on refuge and loss, being lost, being at a loss; on tending and tenderness as a way through loss; on dreaming, and the possibilities that dreaming provides for finding a way through; on wounds as portals and as maps; and on the possibilities of soldering, suturing, bandaging, as they relate metaphorically to the relationship between the wound tender and the wounded. Ultimately that feels like a relationship that we’re all involved in, with one another, with ourselves, and with the wounded world.

I keep falling back on certain materials that I feel are resonant to that meditation: barbed wire, smashed automobile safety glass, and confetti. These materials don’t recur in any methodical way, but they do keep turning up for whatever reason.



ON THE AIR
Mixed Media:

THR: The fact that the barbed wire is broken suggests a kind of opening, a possibility of escape, like a gap in a barbed wire fence, but the pieces are also like bits of shrapnel, fragments of the wounding experience that remain long after the wounding.

KPL: I think you've zeroed in on a really critical issue for me from the beginning: how to handle the barbed wire aesthetically and with meaning. We live on what was an old farm, and there are remnants of barbed wire everywhere. I remove it, and then I think, "this stuff is amazing, and it's so diabolical. Is there any way to think about it other than as malevolent?" It seems always to be used for constraint, whether for cattle or people or prisoners, or in concentration camps.

I wanted to start using it in my work, and I hoped to transform that malevolence by aestheticizing it in some way, through the power of beauty somehow. I worked at painting it and trying to get different finishes on it, but I felt that was ultimately unsuccessful, that the barbed wire was still so insistently itself. Probably in frustration, I started breaking it; even though I couldn't make it beautiful, I could physically break it. It is a ritualized act for me, breaking the barbed wire, that doesn't necessarily domesticate it but forces a change of character on it. Yet I'm really intrigued by your idea that it continues to be a fragment like a shrapnel fragment that is inescapable. It persists in the prick of memory and bodily experience.



INTERIOR LIFE OF STONES
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THR: Several of the titles of these works are evocative and poetic. For example, “Interior Life of Stones,” which is really lovely. It’s something that you could meditate on for quite a while.

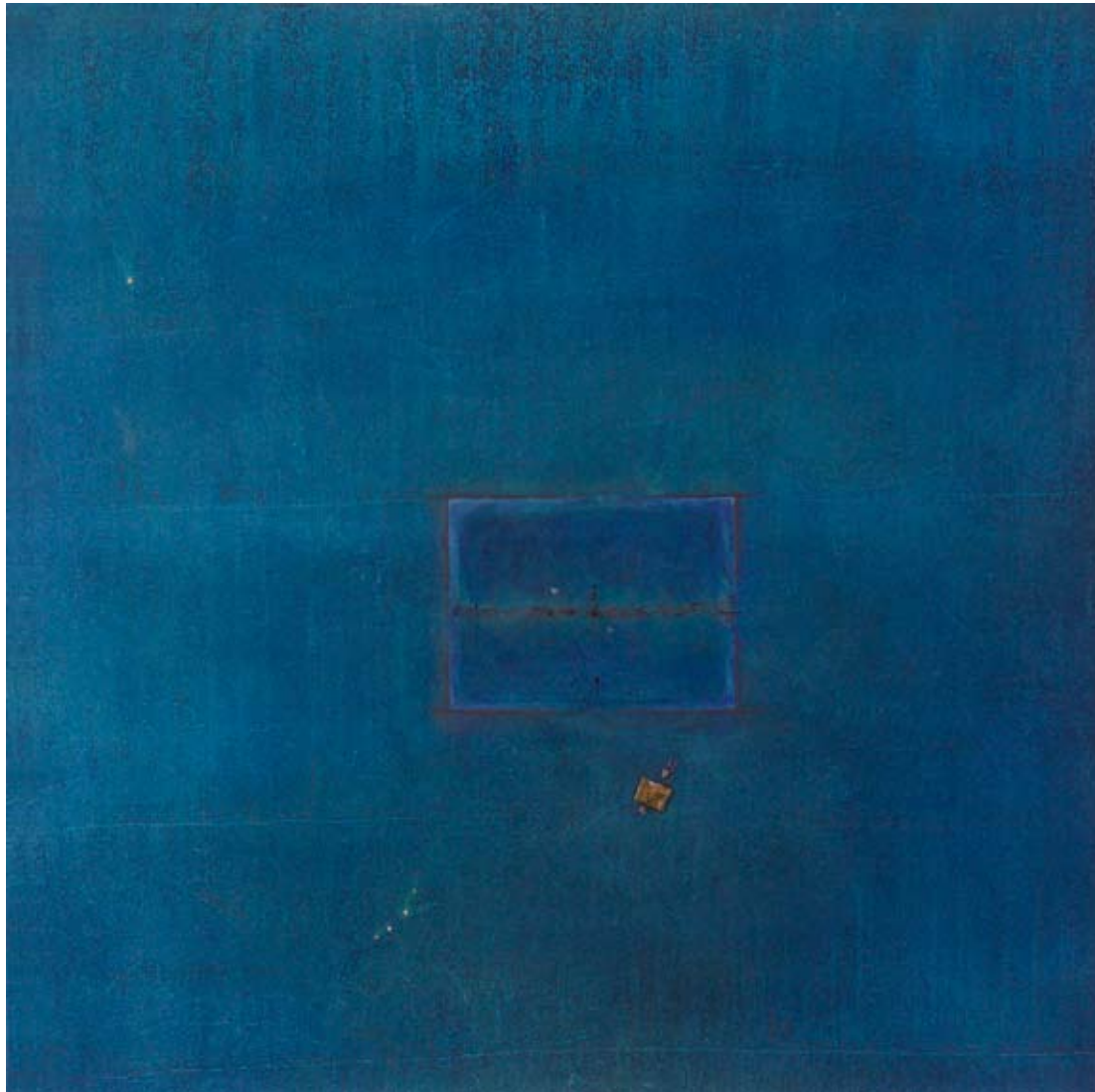
KPL: Yes, I always intended these works to be meditation pieces, and I gave them titles that would resonate with the assemblage on canvas to disorient the viewer and encourage being still, searching for meanings. They’re not absolute pronouncements. They are openings, and I hope viewers find possibilities for association and exploration there. And opportunities to ponder the relationship between language, as it is offered in titles, and material on canvas. I would hope that you could encounter them over time, come and go and live with them, and take them down off the wall and look on the back because many times I’ve written on the back or put messages on the sides. I like the element of surprise—the intimacy of secret sharing.



DR. MUDD'S GHOST ROAD
Mixed Media:

THR: Your works are disorienting in the sense of being abstract and having strange materials in them, but they're also beautiful, and the beauty elicits a kind of attraction that gives us an impetus for attending. For example, in the work entitled "Doctor Mudd's Ghost Road," there are torn shreds of fabric that you could see as the refuse of something that's been torn apart or as confetti because they're very bright.

KPL: I'll tell you a story about confetti... Many years ago, when I was first starting to work like this, my oldest daughter was about three, and my father was dying. It was a long and difficult death for him and for the family, and I was making a large canvas with him in mind—it was a kind of memorializing canvas, but I didn't know how to finish it off. This little daughter had been off in her room furiously working away at something, and she came in with a tiny basket. She'd pulled all the coverings off of her crayons and put them in the basket, and she said, "here, Momma, for your work," and it was the first confetti. It was her gift to me, and suddenly I realized I could throw it down on this canvas, and it would make a fine finish. I was reading Gabriel García Márquez at the time and was drawn into the Day of the Dead and sugar skulls and celebration of death in this strange carnivalesque way. That old canvas was called "Confetti for the Dead," and it was yoking confetti and ancestors in a gesture, an offering. This was the beginning of incorporating gift materials from both of my daughters—small beads, delicately wrought silver wire, confetti, and their language—into my works.



THE BIG OPEN
Mixed Media:

THR: Was one of your hopes for this series that it would make us more aware of or responsive to the wounded soldiers in our midst?

KPL: This work is not meant to be political art, in a didactic sense. But I want it to wound our conscience. To be an “agenbite of inwit,” as James Joyce would say. I hope it gets under our skin, like a piece of shrapnel, and urges us to consider our role as bystanders to the suffering among us. Those wounded soldiers—and there are so many different kinds of wounds they are returning with—are right here. I have wondered if there would be any way for me to reach some of these people myself again, and maybe even work with them. I think there are writers doing this kind of thing, and I wonder if there might be room for material handwork in a healing setting. If there were a way to use these works to make this particular wounding that we have in our midst less invisible, more visible, I would love that. ■