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For the Love of Italian Gardens: Karen Kulyk at Secord Gallery to Sept. 26

Posted on August 19
Karen Kulyk/NS

La Serena, Sunken Garden, oil on canvas, 37 x 22 Karen Kulyk

Trapped at home by the pandemic, Karen Kulyk missed her beloved Italy so much that she decided to travel there through paint.

Physically, she was at her easel in her Dartmouth home, imaginatively, she was in Italy where she had spent close to 30 years. Hiking in the country's northern and central areas in both spring and fall.

Painting "brought me back to a kind of peace," says the cheerful, prolific artist, who translates her high spirits into the compressed energy of her art.

Her current show, comprised of 26 oil, gouache or chalk pastel on six new sets in 8 Columbus Radius at Secord Gallery, 6300 Lady Hammond, Halifax, with an opening reception Friday, Sept. 12, 6 p.m., and artist talk, Saturday, Sept.25, 1 p.m.

Kulyk has captured the formal tailored shapes and multiple patterns of Italian garden design with her own distinctive use of high colour to unite composition and engage the viewer.

It want you to feel the same way I feel about discovering an exciting place so often: I enhance the colour and put other things in as if it was my garden."

She switched a house wall to pink to contrast with cooling navy blues of open windows and doorways; she celebrated a tree she loved by painting it in small places of brown and purple.

Street Garden, Alba, gouache on paper, 20 x 30, Karen Kulyk

Kulyk loves the colour green – "Well, it is the middle of the spectrum. It is such a powerful colour." In fact, her kitchen is full of greens – bright green bandeau on cool green cupboards, a pale green lamp hanging over her dining table, a simple arrangement in a green plastic kitchen chair next to a blazing green tree.

Kulyk's palette is unusual in that it includes a wide range of colours but also a huge variety of other colour: ocho and oranges to burning umber, pinks and whites to lively apricot. Blooms, the best authors of humorous books or disrupting our homebody, steady nostalgic lives to shadowy evening views and, of course, a lot of colour, earthy terracotta in red tiles and all sorts of planters.

Rose Garden, Lucca,Armoed from the vanquerisi, gouache on paper, 30 x 8 Karen Kulyk

"Colour has always driven me. Initially I worked with an impressionist palette. Now I use everything. I'm included earthy colours, but I like to add colour. I have to see black and white sketch to the exhibit which demonstrates the force and description power of her line.

As the daughter of Ukrainian immigrants, Kulyk grew up in a culture that celebrates colour in ribbons, clothing, embroidery and ceramics.

When she was a student in fine arts at York University, her professors were American draft dodgers escaping the Vietnam war. "It was very exciting but no one taught us how to paint. We weren't had an anatomy lesson. When I left I couldn't afford to paint models. I had to develop my conservation and I taught myself."

Her first pastoral simple collection of seashells framing an white space there started adding tables, flowers and gardens. Travel became key to her imagery.

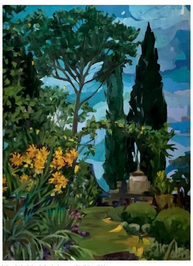
Kulyk has explored and sketched in France, England, Spain, Thailand, Hong Kong, Bermuda, Mexico, Cuba and Venezuela. Until 9-11, "I thought I knew was my thing."

Now she loves Italy. "It's the colour and sophistication. I love the words. I love the way they speak with their hands. I love the design and clothing; you can buy suit shadows that are spectacular and yet they're simple."

Simplicity is also key to Italian garden design. "Italian gardens are sculpted and not just a riot of colour. They are designed to be like a huge house with chambers you'd go into. They are a place people would go to be released from the intense heat of the Italian summer, the crowding, and settle themselves into a more relaxed environment."

These ordered, manicured and symmetrical gardens have their roots in ancient Roman villas with a design perfected in the Renaissance. At the first hundred years of the Cinnimon Era, author and lancer Pliny the Younger loved to spend time with the renowned hedges and sculpted hemmedi of his garden at his Tuscan cousin.

The public and private gardens Kulyk visited in Italy ranged from Cinnamon gardens attached to a hotel in Alba to elaborately sculpted gardens in Lucca to the Sunken Garden in Siena to the Rose Garden in Lucca to the Giardino Giusti of Jamie Oliver's Gap pants in Front of a house at the end of an alley. "They can hardly get any more from more but all their pots."



La Vista, Castello Nidi di Ale Bosch, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 Karen Kulyk

Kulyk, now 70, is an enthusiastic and always an over about making art. "I want to get as good as I can ever get. I've been working really hard and concentrating on her I guess."

At this stage of her life she uses the best materials, her favourite Williamsburg paints and British chalk pastels. Her cousin off her decades in terms of media watercolours is her life, watercolour and gouache is her life, chalk pastel is her life and oils, then oils. "Of opened up a whole new spectrum and I love to mix colours. Oil I find it living. It's really rich." She finds acrylic paint flat.

She is reading Mary Gabriel's fascinating book, Ninth Street Women, about the American, female, abstract artists including Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan and Joan Mitchell, whose work she loves.

Like them she uses colour expressively and plays with shape and colour, particularly in semi-abstracted skies full of movement and emotion in different blues and whites.

Bermuda Trio, Botanical garden Crivisi, Alba, gouache on paper, 30 x 8, Karen Kulyk

Kulyk's work has been widely collected and exhibited internationally including in solo shows at the National Gallery of Thailand, Art Gallery of Ontario (touring exhibition), University of Toronto (Vic College), Dickson Waterloo Art Gallery, Chicago International Art Exhibition, Festival Canada (Hong Kong), Marianne Friedland Gallery in Ontario and in Halifax at Mary Ellen Gallery and Gallery 1.

In 2004 Kulyk was awarded the Gold Medal for watercolour painting in the Percigrazzi Terme International Art Competition in Italy. She is also the official artist for Sheep Ridge Cellars.

While shop full of details and energy in line, colour and sculptural forms, these paintings are as calming and beautiful as the gardens are intended to be. The sensations of feel and cold can be felt on the skin.

8 Columbus Radius is on to Sept. 26; the works may also be viewed online: *www.jc.www.nsreadfarcer.com/art/?order,plus/1,category/1555*

photo: Karen Kulyk/artist Janice Kulyk Keefer is a well-known Canadian writer and I stole her phrase "compressed energy" from an essay she wrote on her sister's art for the book Karen Kulyk: A Vision of Tuscany because it's such an accurate description.

Karen Kulyk (contributed)

Peace in Alba Manor, La Pace, gouache on paper, 12 x 8, Karen Kulyk

La Lunettona, By the Bellerang Pool, oil on canvas, 24 x 30, Karen Kulyk

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