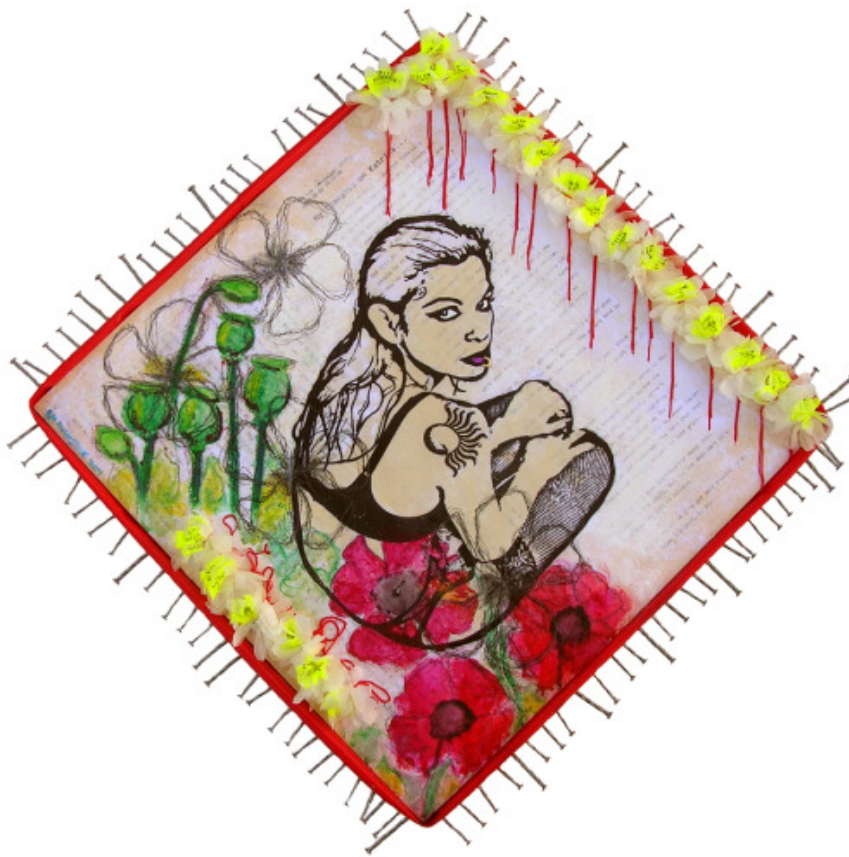




Meet the Artists: Karen Miranda Augustine

by Anna Foran

Karen Miranda Augustine is an artist, writer, and videomaker who studied at York University in Toronto. Her works have been exhibited in Canada, the US, Scotland, and Haiti. Her creative projects ride on the confluence of sex, pop culture, spirituality, and the underground.



Eva Lux (2014)

ANNA FORAN: The works in your series *PAINTED LOVE: Requiem for Salacious Sex Queens* all integrate actual clothing items and accessories — blouses, fishnet, nail polish — as artistic material. These, along with the photographs from which you work, seem to function as a literal trace of the represented subject. Can you speak to this idea of physical trace or archive, in the context of assemblage and feminist art, but also in light of your focus on deceased sex-working women?

KAREN MIRANDA AUGUSTINE: Funny, I wasn't even aware that I was using a lot of women's items and accessories until you pointed it out. The only exception being the use of nail polish, which is a

direct influence from the late San Francisco artist Jerome Caja. He was a brilliant mixed-media artist and drag queen who made small works depicting controversial images on sexuality, Catholicism, and being HIV+, which he created using paint and makeup on personal effects and found objects. So really, it is through his artistic legacy that I was inspired to incorporate nail polish as a staple in my own art materials.

With the women's clothing, since some of my close friends know that I'm always purchasing ridiculously priced ornate fabrics, they have started setting aside vintage clothes that they are getting rid of so that I can have first dibs before they dispose of them. So some of those items have been incorporated into this working series. It wasn't a conscious choice, but rather it happened due to personal economics and my love for interesting textiles.

With the two Canadian women in this series — Wendy Babcock and Sarah de Vries — whose pieces I am currently working on, I have also been incorporating a bit of embroidery because I love texture and am always seeking different ways to use disparate materials to create, as I am not a traditional painter or illustrator. And I like to put my “hand” in the work, so to speak.

My approach, with pretty much all my female subjects, regardless of series, is that I want to evoke each woman’s rich, inner beauty. And I guess by adding these materials to build up her image, I am able to use items that I am personally drawn to. These are things that either I liked to doll myself up with when I was a young girl playing with my mom’s makeup, foreign textiles that glitter or have a beautiful or unusual pattern, elements of life like feathers, hides and boas, or sequins, which have transcendental references inherent in the ornate ritual arts of Haiti.

That the women were involved as sex workers is also a part of that. But I am also a very sexually expressive person, so there is a part that must satisfy my own proclivities.

The overarching issue is to create some form of intimacy with each of the pieces, which is why all of them are framed — albeit not necessarily in a typical way. But framing them, nonetheless, whether it be as a funeral wreath made from tires and silk flowers (as with Wendy Babcock and Sarah de Vries’ portraits), a bundle of latex, leather and hammered nails (as with Eva Lux and Wendy O. Williams’ pieces), or the use of upcycled discarded picture frames, I wanted to find a way to make the works intimate and leave you with the feeling that this woman is cherished by someone and is of significance.

When we honour the dead we are honouring their essence. And all of the women who I have chosen were not only sex industry-involved, but they were also talented, complex women whose lives impacted others in meaningful ways. So I’m hoping that when this series is complete, it will spark an interest in others researching my subjects to understand the legacies I believe they’ve left us with.



Anastasia Blue (2013), Collection of Fred Budnik

AF: Your self-described “ritualistic pop art” brings to mind other traditions of shrine art, including the memorializing sculptures and assemblages created during Day of the Dead celebrations. With this in mind, what are some of your artistic, cultural, or spiritual influences?

No one has ever taken the time to ask me such great questions and your insight with shrine art and Day of the Dead celebrations is really spot on. And that is refreshing.

I’m a serious death hag through and through and am a bit obsessive over needing to know who died today. True story. I Google “recent deaths” several times daily and then check out articles, remembrances and photos on random people’s lives. Yeah, I’m that chick. But I’m in good company as there are many interesting on-line forums and sites where folks appear to be way more intensely preoccupied about it than me.

But all jokes aside, I love the unfiltered, almost from the earth type of ceremonial art and body adornment especially — pretty much any form of ritual where there is a deep reverence taking place (think: spiritual baptists), devotion and the natural environment, or when one is in the place where the ego has abandoned itself — like in Vodou possession, which is remarkably similar to watching

someone dance with intense abandon in Jamaican dancehall. And that’s deep.

At one point I was taken with the Wodaabe ritual where the men paint their faces and outdo each other by making the most extreme facial expressions they can in order to attract a woman, and that's hot. There are also various ethnic groups in the Asaro region of Papua New Guinea who cover their heads in a casing of mud when they are in mourning, and in that I find something both reverent and practical in that it acknowledges that deep emotional ache of grief. Which is why I'm also fascinated by Mexican *descansos* (roadside memorials), as well as many handmade markers of death because they start off spontaneously, that immediate reaction of love, before they build with planning and time into more of a makeshift, public shrine. But I've seen this many times in the city and always find them so moving.

A few years ago at Dupont Station, someone had left a flower and a simple handwritten note taped to the wall of the southbound platform, which I will assume was marking a friend's suicide. And I found that to be a really moving gesture — not just the ability to express your immediate, profound sadness for the loss of someone but to also command respect for this person in a space created to have no concern over such matters (i.e., it's not a church or funeral home). And this is done for a person who would normally be just a faceless body bypassing you on a subway platform while you get on with the journey of your day — I think there are few acts as beautiful. We see them when there is a news-covered story about a child murder, for example, but when it is random, unseen and unknown, that's really quite something.



Lori Alexia (2013), Collection of Fred Budnik

There are artists who I would classify as having a very shamanistic quality to their work, and they influence me immensely. These are artists who work with discarded or unconventional materials from which they have been able to create art that emits a strong presence — just a really powerful energy. And not everyone who works with discarded materials creates work that does that. So I would say that artists such as Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Antoni Tàpies, Brian Jungen, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jean-Michel Basquiat are just that. Their works have an almost animistic quality, which one would find in traditional African sculpture, in that some of their works have crossed that line of “representing” to “becoming”: it just is — and I'm not talking affect theory. There's absolutely nothing academic about what I'm talking about. I'm speaking about something pure and real that reaches a different plane of the senses. And that's a very hard thing to reach as an artist and I think it's accomplished by creating from a place where something has opened up inside you and you just go with it.

But there are also those artists who create from a place of exposing our humanity, which I believe to be the most radical thing one can express. It's the very thing that got someone like Malcolm X killed. Artists that work from a place of showing how we are interconnected is a powerful thing. It's the

reason why I'm drawn to Tim Okamura's paintings and the work of local artist Gareth Bate whose *Jewel Net of Indra* installation project has got to be one of the most brilliant and thought-provoking things I've seen in a while.

But really, I'm probably most influenced by my pain and in that pain I can recognize it in others, specifically in women who I would classify as being a part of "my tribe." And my tribe are women with which I share similar experiences. These are women who have had troubled childhoods, have a history of sexual assault, grew up financially compromised, have self-harmed, are outsiders, have experienced things that may be considered unusual to experience at a very young age and manifest in behaviours misunderstood in adulthood...and I get that. And our dead do too. These are women who are strong in all of their messiness but need to understand that they are love. And that's what I try to express when I create images of them.

It is the reason why I reference elements of spiritual belief systems that resonate with me or use techniques of various ritual arts to visually express how I believe our deceased loved ones see and feel about us. Ifá (Nigeria), Vodou (Haiti) and Macumba (Brazil) are the most prevalent, but I am also drawn towards certain aspects of Buddhist, Sufi and indigenous practices. Pretty much anything that acknowledges some aspect of mediumship, the transcendent, the existence of an in between space where the material and spirit world meet, I can rock with.