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Art in America

Uncertain Narrative: Q+A With Karen Heagle

by *cassandra neyenesch* 10/19/11

In her third solo show at I-20 Gallery [through Oct. 29], "Let Nature Take Its Course And Hope It Passes," Karen Heagle skirts sophisticated taste with simple and muscular garage-art renderings that attain moments of rough expressionism. *Weedburner* (2011), a painting of branches on fire in a wheelbarrow set against a flat field and a pale pink sky, evokes the idea of memory, heat and smell; the painting works because it addresses the awkwardness with which we re-paint our own memories, the sense of creative—even artistic—participation involved in nostalgia and recall.

If the nature morte was traditionally a display of virtuosity combined with a comment on the transitory quality of existence, what does the current re-emergence of still life mean to contemporary artists? Heagle uses her symbols in a secretive way that she says is obscure even to her: "When I've cracked the code of exactly what it means to me, then I'll abandon it.



"CASSANDRA NEYENESCH Any contemporary narrative painter today works indialogue with abstraction to some degree, and I saw that in this show.

KAREN HEAGLE You're thinking of the suit of armor (*Self Portrait*, 2011)?

NEYENESCH Exactly. Interestingly, you use metallic paint in the background and then the suit of armor is rendered very abstractly. It definitely comes across as metal, but it's very loosely painted. That's a funny contrast with the use of metallic paint in the background.

HEAGLE That painting was the last one I completed for this show. In it are the lessons of all the paintings I did before it. It floated around my studio: I would work on it here and there, and I didn't think I was going to finish it. I had come back to using metal leaf from a long time ago—the background is gold and copper leaf. For this body of work I started collaging colored paper into the work. For *Weedburner*, for instance, the whole background is pink, which is the pink of the paper. The color of the paper is called "dawn." I didn't even realize it was called "dawn" until I put it on, then I started obsessing about the names of the paper. And then I realized it kind of evoked that feeling of sunrise. That became part of the color with the works.

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NEYENESCH Does the image come first, or the paper?

HEAGLE The image always comes first. It all emerges in the process of making the painting. Because the acrylics are a transparent medium, whatever base color is underneath will affect the colors on top, and that became something that I was really interested in. In a painter's painter sense it was very impure to be using paper in there, but it was also very fun.

Ten years ago I did a series of icon paintings. I was a guard at the Met for a year, and when I was guarding paintings it would be Saturday night and I would be guarding the 15th-century icon paintings and at the same time the program *Xena: Warrior Princess* was on TV. I was bored, so I would be daydreaming about Xena because my VCR was going to be recording it at home. I started making paintings of Xena with gold leaf in the background . . . and then that evolved into other things and I abandoned it and got sick of using the leaf. But when I was doing the big piece *Let Nature Take its Course*, with the deer head and the vulture and the women wrestlers, I just thought about using leaf again, and because I was collaging the paper, that made me think about the leaf again, too. My point is that the process of making the painting is informing what it needs to happen to it.

NEYENESCH I was curious about the mix of metaphor and memory and direct observation. Obviously not every object in every painting is a metaphor for something else, but there are some things that are metaphorical, and then the fire in the wheelbarrow (*Weedburner*) really has an elegiac feeling about it. And then I saw an earlier one you did with fire that looked like pubic hair (*Death Valley*, 2008).

HEAGLE That was from a trip to Death Valley; there are these dried-out tumbleweeds that look like burning bushes. I made that one a lot brighter. I take the encounter as a point of departure and make it into this other thing and when you look at the end piece all of a sudden it has this Biblical kind of feeling. I think just by virtue of its simplicity you want to assign a meaning to it. Because I'm a recovering Catholic, I have all the religious guilt. When my family saw I was heading down the path of being an artist, they encouraged me to be a nun.

NEYENESCH Why?

HEAGLE Gay . . . artist . . . they saw it was going to be a real struggle for me if I continued down the path I was going down.

NEYENESCH Did you consider it?**HEAGLE** A bit. I went to Catholic school. I thought the nuns seemed kind of cool. I've done a few paintings of them.

NEYENESCH How about the images of vultures?

HEAGLE When I started using vultures in 2003, it was kind of as an erotic thing. It began with one painting.

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NEYENESCH Erotic because their hunger is so without shame?

HEAGLE Yeah. Well, it's mysterious what exactly the vulture's meaning is to me. At times it reminds me of Philip Guston—he had these paintings where he would make an ugly self-portrait, this kind of big Mr. Potato Head thing with the cigarette. Sometimes I think of the vulture as an ugly self-portrait.

Right before my last show, in 2008, the art world was going crazy. It was kind of gross the way people were feeding on each other, which was not erotic at all, it was actually really upsetting and then right after that show the whole market crashed.

In some ways I feel like the imagery explains it better than I'm explaining it to you. I just think it's potent enough that it's kind of communicating all these feelings about desire, and survival, and feelings that someone is picking at you, trying to manipulate you and consume you. Karen Heagle, *Weedburner*, 2011, Acrylic, ink and collage on paper, 64 x 64 inches