

Femme Visuale: Karen Tucker Kuykendall

Feeling a tad claustrophobic?

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Renzo and Lucia with their dog at the Beach, oil and Sharpie on canvas, 30 x 30 in. Karen Tucker Kuykendall

Feb. 11 marked the first anniversary of the Femme Visuale series. Still in disbelief that it's been a year of promoting local women in the arts, now more than ever is it imperative to keep shedding light on and supporting the talented creatives that are right in our own backyard. Only one year down, with many more to come.

Confronted with Kuykendall's paintings, you'll be sure to feel the effects of our increasingly fast-paced life in her crowded scenes. Birds-of-prey layered on top of sunny-side up eggs layered on top of palm fronds layered on top of water ripples in *Anticipation* make you feel the tension of our everyday lives, but always with a touch of comic relief.

"There has to be a little humor in everything that you do in life, or it's hard to get through. That's always been important to me, but also I don't want my paintings to just come off as humorous," Kuykendall says.

You can go out on a limb and tell she's a Florida native with her use of Florida icons like oranges, egrets, osprey, and sea grapes, but she also includes illustrations from old children's

books and nursery rhymes like *The Gingerbread Man* or *Humpty Dumpty*. To construct her images, Kuykendall works in Photoshop to digitally cut out her images, spending most of her time shuffling the pieces together until everything falls together.

“I love the design part of it, but it takes a month to finish the composition. In the olden days, I would cut out pictures and if I wanted them larger, I would have to go down to the Golden Triangle to have them enlarge it. Then I would cut things out and glue them down,” she says. “Photoshop made my life easier in ways, but in ways it gave me too many options.”



Anticipation, oil on canvas, 54 x 63 in. Karen Tucker Kuykendall

Printing out enlarged sections of her digital maquette, she does a little gridding on her canvas before starting her underpainting, which approximates the color, then her final layer of vibrant hues. It takes between three and seven months to complete a painting, depending on the size. Kuykendall recalls when she first started getting into these collage-like paintings:

“I came out [of] a very abstract school, pouring paint all over and doing these giant paintings. When I finished college, I started painting things around me. I did a lot of banana trees, but I realized that the love of the abstract was still in me. When you’re working on a small area of a painting, it really is abstract because I don’t think of it as the plant, I think of it in terms of red and green or other colors and shapes.

“When I realized what I was doing, I wanted to bring some other things in. I started taking pictures of items I wanted to paint, then cut and collaged them. It’s that old juxtaposition thing,” she says. “But that’s what we all do: we put things together that are unlikely, but do go together whether it’s intuitive or not.”

Thinking about painting through the eyes of an abstract painter (dealing with color, line, movement, and other formal elements), but through representational imagery leaves the viewer with open narratives to decipher, relating one symbol or sign to another within the painting.



Pursuit, oil on canvas, 48 x 50 in. Karen Tucker

Kuykendall

Wherever she goes, she takes a sketchbook with her. Eventually, she started including her own drawings or doodles in the paintings, scanning the images from her stack of notebooks.

“I became interested in the contrast between painting a landscape that has depth while really thinking about the flat surface of the canvas. I don’t want a whole lot of texture on the canvas, so I emphasize its flatness. You have depth of the palm fronds, but then you have these whiffle balls on top that come off flat [like in *Pursuit*],” she explains. “Sometimes it’s a fight of what gets to be the most ‘on top.’”

What’s left is a confused surface where all at the same time, it reads as one image like a landscape, but it also is chopped up when pictorial dimension (like in the well-rendered birds) clashes with the flatness of the “hand-drawn” elements that feel like stickers pressed on the surface.

Even the backgrounds aren't simple backdrops: Star shapes are cut out from other similar scenes to create a puzzle-patterned, fragmented landscape. Since most of the elements have differing perspectives too, her compositions are a lot to take in. It's almost as if Kuykendall wanted to include everything that catches her eye, so everything in the painting is of interest, leaving your eyes with no resting place.



Stars and Stripes, Oil and Sharpie on Canvas, 24 x24 in. Karen Tucker Kuykendall

“You’ve heard the term ‘horror vacui’ in painting, but it’s the idea that in a work of art, every space is filled with detail. I think, unfortunately, that I am that way.

"If you look at them from a distance, they are very abstract in that it's about the overall shapes. It's all one thing. Everything is equally as important, *but* you then can go in closer, look at a section and take in the details," she says.

Remember, when Kuykendall works on the piece, her face is inches from the surface; therefore, different sections of each painting contain interesting smaller compositions.

In her current and upcoming projects, she is dealing more with motion in the overall composition and emphasizing the surface with flat images, working on a smaller scale with 24-inch square canvases.

"Bigger paintings can have more things, but the smaller ones can't hold as much. What I would like to do is reduce the amount of things in the images, but that might be wishful thinking," she says.



Outrageous Expectation, oil on canvas, 48 x50 in. Karen Tucker Kuykendall

While the imagery is somewhat important, it pales in comparison to the importance of the refreshed view that Kuykendall hopes the viewer will have in visiting and revisiting her paintings over the years.

"For me, I may have a particular story in mind, but I don't think it's important that everybody knows my story. Like in this piece [*Outrageous Expectation*], you have a lot of running and things happening, so this may have been a time in my life when I felt overwhelmed. I am reaching for things, trying to overcome things, accomplish things. I am running out of time. Things that I don't like are catching up with me. Political and environmental issues are beyond my control. There doesn't seem to be anything I can realistically do to change things, but 'overwhelmed' just seems like an over simplification.

“It’s hard for me to explain why I put things in my paintings, I do it because they seem right. I often include things because they relate visually to other things with which they have no other relationship. It’s more about fragments of a story, not necessarily one that has a beginning, middle, and end. They have plots and subplots,” she says. “For me, I want the viewers to see something different or new every time they look at the painting, not just in the first few viewings, but always.”



Shout Hallelujah Come On Get Happy, Oil and Sharpie on Canvas, 54 x 63 in. Karen Tucker Kuykendall

To see more of Karen Tucker Kuykendall’s work, please visit her website: karenkuykendall.com.

You can also see her paintings in person at Clayton Galleries, where she is represented.

Femme Visuale aims to highlight local women artists and show off some lesser-known talent that's been hiding in the shadows. In the art world, if it ain't big and loud, it ain't being seen. Art as a grand spectacle leaves little room for modest, sincere, or quiet voices, especially women's voices. And I promise, we won't bite.

Caitlin Albritton, CL Tampa's visual arts critic, spends her time tracking down art you might not see anywhere else. She's also an artist in her own right. Follow her on [Instagram](#) or [read her blog](#).