

## Fluid Fire

Liz Insogna

Painter

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*Battle Armor* is the current exhibition at Churner and Churner Gallery of new paintings by Karen Heagle. The works move fluidly through real subjects expanding the realm of Queer Fantasy in space and firing the imagination in every subtle stroke.



Karen Heagle, "The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian," 2012, oil on panel, 67" x 46", Courtesy of the Artist

**Liz Insogna:** *Entering into your exhibition, Battle Armor, I couldn't help but get a flashback of the St. Sebastian painting in your studio last July. The similar palette and treatment of the edges did it -- though the subject matter is seemingly on opposite poles, it makes me think of our more recent conversation about a thread of S&M in the works. Could you go into this a little more with me, here?*

**Karen Heagle:** It's rather keen that, that work comes to mind for you. The St. Sebastian painting certainly set the tone for the Battle Armor pieces, which I began right after I finished the Saint painting. I guess the subjects as you observe them, are opposite poles because the Saint is quite bare, and the Armor is very much about covering up, hiding, or protecting the flesh.

A collector, who has been more like a patron to me in recent years, commissioned that painting. He wanted me to make a copy of Caravaggio's St. Sebastian casting Gabriel Garcia Bernal (as St. Sebastian). His arms are bound as they are in the painting that it is based on, but his feet are being tied with strips of film by a likeness of Pedro Almodovar. (Alluding to rumored discontent between the actor and the director during the filming of *Bad Education* that allegedly stemmed from Bernal being objectified in a homosexual context). The film tells the story of sexual abuse in a Catholic boys school and its imprint on the lives of the characters. I did a lot of research to make the painting. In addition to reading the recent Andrew Graham Dixon biography of Caravaggio, I carefully watched *Bad Education*, for themes, color and gender play as I tried to bring them into the work. Immersing myself in Caravaggio, who is a painter I have always been interested in, informed not only the subjects in the Battle Armor pieces, but also the palette, and the chiaroscuro.

Speaking to our more recent conversation, we did wander into some interesting territory on the subject of S&M. Some of the armor imagery has a feeling of S&M fetish culture. That kind of occurred to me as I was working on it. You also picked up on the religious underpinning in the work. I find parallels between the fetish culture and being raised Catholic. A recurring theme in Catholicism seems to be the transcendence of sin into ecstasy through suffering or bearing witness to exquisite torture. It is moving and profound.

**LI:** *Joan of Arc also comes to mind. It's the armor and the implicit religious undertones that seem to leap out at me when looking at the work. It's also the way you've been able to rework playing around with gender roles in fantasy or in a fantastic way. I'm also curious about any connection with martyrdom in your world and work.*

**KH:** As someone who grew up attending church every Sunday right up until I was 18 or 19, I unconsciously absorbed a lot of highly charged imagery and ritual: imagery that was meant to arouse one's faith. To sit for an hour every week listening to hymns, genuflecting before the image of a naked man in a loin cloth nailed to a cross, (in the church I attended the loin cloth was well below his navel) I spent a good deal of time in church contemplating those wounds; and it fed my erotic imagination at the time without a great deal of awareness of it. I think that martyrdom of the Saints, their suffering and the imagery associated with it, is compelling to me possibly from all that contemplating on Sundays.

In Catholic School for sixth grade graduation, I received the (annual) Most Christian Girl Award. (This award often shows up symbolically in my work as a small trophy with a cross on it) I would go to school and exist obediently, and I never spoke to anyone. This is how I achieved the award. When I got home from school I immediately began drawing, and writing comic books, (stories that usually surrounded female private detectives, and a group of gun toting thugs). Interestingly my parents strongly urged me as a teenager to consider joining the

convent. I can't say for certain that they suspected I was gay, but they definitely were against my becoming an artist. It was as though they feared my wayward path.

The balance of genuine piety and underlying perversion has played a role in my life and conversely my work. I think being raised this way inevitably you either are repressed around these things and do what the gospel says without question or if, when you become aware of your difference, you start to explore them more deeply and break them down. Not necessarily that black and white. As a queer person I had to understand them in terms of my sexuality. So I went there.

The other thing I was recalling while considering your questions was an essay by Dorothy Allison that was the point of departure for my first show in 2001, at 31 Grand Gallery, which was called *Puritans, Perverts and Feminists*. The essay is like a confessional. Allison's blunt, vulgar, yet honest style of making her point resonated with me. She reveals that her adolescent sexual fantasies and what got her off were science fiction stories. (i.e.: Sam Delaney-Star Trek Fanzines, The Great Tyrant from Barbarella and many more). In the essay she takes issue with the feminists of the day who strongly disapproved of pornography. "There is the notion that sex is separable from life, that pornography is not only debased but easily recognizable." She continues, "When a woman becomes fervently righteous on this subject, I want to ask them about their girlhood fantasies."

Before I made the pieces for the show. I had been making sketches and thinking about the Battle Armor imagery. In the midst of this, I was part of a group of four artists' who was invited by Skowhegan to do a tour of our favorite work at the Met. One of the artists, also a lesbian, brought us to the Arms and Armor collection disclosing to the group that when she was a girl she pretended to be a knight, and was obsessed with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Inspired by her talk, I took a series of pictures of the various suits in the Mets collection. From these photos I developed the paintings in the show. Her talk really brought home a lot of these ideas about the innocence and importance of this early identification with masculinity, that many queer girls experienced. It may have made our parents nervous hoping it was just a phase but to us it was integral in getting to know ourselves. I did not necessarily play knights, I was more GI Joe, cowboy kind of stuff, but definitely I was naturally disposed toward things that boys tended toward.

**LI:** *The break down here of your psychological and emotional source material is powerful. Painting throughout time has a hidden libido. I'm wondering if here, being a queer person allowed access to something -- another kind of space, as per your mention of understanding or questioning terms in spirituality through sexuality. I agree that there's another layer of awareness that comes with the territory, one which not only fires the imagination but takes the layers of historical acts and responses into consideration, even if it's subliminal. When I look at your work through this lens, a peacock is certainly not just a peacock, and a piece of armor with a protector below the waist (one which looks like a magical, detachable and not quite retractable phallic object in your work) -- is something much more than meets the eye.*

**KH:** You definitely are touching on the underlying dynamic of my painting when you refer to the layers of awareness that come with this territory and so forth. What's fundamental to me is that the peacock and the armor with codpiece are both readymade symbols, which is what draws me to them. The peacock appealed to me because of its associations with beauty, and flamboyance. Previously, I have been exploring imagery using the vulture, in terms of its associations with macabre predation. The peacock seemed refined like the antithesis of the vulture. What makes them readymade is these associations are based on received ideas surrounding these symbols. While still accentuating these ideas the challenge becomes subverting them at the same time.

The existence of a particular space that you are curious about which is privileged by my sexuality in the realm of spirituality is accessed very intuitively. It makes me think about the influence of repression overriding sexual impulses as a Catholic and then ultimately becoming aware of a queer identity. The awareness feels like an inner rebellion, essentially freeing my imagination enriching my fantasy life. This kind of repression creates a heightened lure to the biblically forbidden that even if I couldn't rectify this practically in life; it finds form in the work.

The suit of armor that served as source material for the other work that you cite, actually does have an ornate, curving codpiece that seems to be curiously formed shielding the warrior's erection. Within my pantheon of imagery exists a synthetic masculinity. The real invention in my interpretations take place in the painterly execution in terms of color as well as temperature lending to the electricity in the picture, heralding the libido behind the painting. I think your choice of description: magical, detachable, not quite retractable, phallic, are correlative of that which drew me to that suit. I want the viewer to make these associations but I imagine someone who has had awareness or experience with a strap on or dildos is more likely the viewer who will recognize this possible read. If that's not part of your experience, you might not see it that way. I would also add, some of the sexiest erotic works can be those that tantalize and draw you right to the edge with erotic promise, as you suggest, fire the imagination, rather than being explicit and overt. I prefer my work to operate this way.

The other thing is a lot of work through out the history of queer artist's practice has relied on codes, and hidden meanings, that would be recognized most specifically by another homosexual. Mostly because it was not safe per say to be out, the artist was communicating, "more than meets the eye" with like-minded individuals. Its really in the post AIDS world where speaking in codes is outweighed by the necessity of getting the message out there in a more activist nature. I think the questions that come up now more often are how to address

queer imagery in a time when, especially a younger generation is much more accepting of a queer aesthetic, and there is more trading of ideas across the sexual spectrum possibly negating the unique nature of homosexual codes, and how they function.



Karen Heagle, "Battle Armor with Codpiece," 2012, acrylic, ink, gold/copper leaf and collage on paper, 55" x 41",  
Courtesy of the Artist and Churner and Churner Gallery

Battle Armor is up until June 22nd at Churner and Churner. For more information please visit their website:  
<http://churnerandchurner.com/>

She was recently interviewed by Velvet Park Media :  
<http://velvetparkmedia.com/video/karen-heagles-battle-armor-churner-churner>

<http://www.karenheagle.com>

Liz Insogna is a painter in NYC: <http://lizinsogna.com/home.html>