

Karen Sistek

Flowers from the Heart

by Tunizia Abdur-Raheem



"Pink Peony"

Karen's flower paintings rival those of Georgia O'Keefe. They are close-ups, lush and juicy renditions of a world that most of us never get close enough to really see in such exquisite detail. O'Keefe once said, when asked why she paints flowers at such a close perspective, "I decided that if I could paint that flower in a huge scale, you could not ignore its beauty." This describes Karen's detailed views of the inner world, the heart of flowers. She brings that perspective right into your face. The richness of the petals gives you a sensory experience – as if you can feel the soft fuzziness of the petals in your hand. You can almost smell their dew.

From her home in upstate Washington, near the Pacific Ocean, Karen is currently living out her second life. And while many of us have to purposely reinvent ourselves, Karen's new course

in life seemed to just happen – a result of a natural and unplanned chain of events.

In the first part of her life she was a super-mom and military spouse. But since her husband retired from a 26-year stint as a pilot in the Coast Guard, Karen has been practicing her art.

With no professional art training or background, she is a self-taught artist. In her career as supermom, she enjoyed working with the children on various arts and crafts projects. "I volunteered from preschool all the way through high school. I was very, very active. I loved doing art projects with the kids. I loved that they had fun and realized, after the project, that they had 'learned' something in the process."

After discovering silk painting, she devoured every silk painting techniques book she could find. She discovered Susan Louise Moyer's books and

considers them to be the best of their kind. "Her books are the most informative and detailed in their instructions."

She has since had the pleasure of meeting Susan Louise and, in fact, Susan Louise has become a mentor of sorts. "I got to take a class with her," Karen gushes. "It was such an honor." Karen credits Susan Louise with encouraging her in developing her painting skills. While Karen was still struggling to capture her vision onto silk and asking Susan Louise for pointers, Susan Louise commanded, "Karen," she said. "Paint what you see."

She discovered silk painting quite by accident. "At one time, I chose expensive designer fabric to sew onto sweatshirts. I then quilted the fabric and sewed on sequins and beads. While shopping in Oregon, the fabric store manager came up to me and asked if I painted my fabric. I said, no, but I would love to learn how." She told Karen about a store called Daisy Kingdom in Portland that gave classes. "I signed up immediately and held my breath for the next 6 weeks until the day of the class finally arrived. It was a three-hour class. They taught a scarf project using the fixative fix dyes, Jacquard green label. I didn't sleep or eat, and ignored my family for the next five days – and nights – experimenting and painting." She has been going ever since.

Art is now her fulltime job. "I spend about 10 to 12 hours a day in my studio." As she works, time seems to just slip away.

In addition to having a great new career, Karen is also fortunate to have a husband who is very supportive and quite handy. Karen and Rick recently celebrated their 49th anniversary of "going steady" – they were high school sweethearts. They have been married for 43 years.

Rick acts as Karen's business manager and promoter. "I'm very lucky. I have no time to pursue marketing. Rick handles all of that." Rick has also taken over some of the chores on the home front, such as cleaning, housework, running errands and preparing delicious meals. "He beeps me on the intercom, and asks, 'when you do want to eat dinner?' I pinch myself, then answer, 'six and a half minutes'. His reply? 'Is that 'Karen time or real time?' I am so very blessed!"



"Lynda Veronica"

Owing to problems with her neck, Karen is unable to bend over a painting for long periods of time. So she designed a method, using bungee cords, where she could paint with the silk suspended directly in front of her. When she was chosen to participate in a SPIN-sponsored show featuring silk painted orchid banners, Karen needed special painting accommodations – the banners were 3 feet wide by 9 feet long. Since she couldn't bend over the silk, she needed to have the silk suspended. "There was only one place in the house big enough to accommodate the painting. This was in the front entry of our house, where our ceilings are 15 feet tall." Rick designed and built the scaffolding that Karen used to paint the banner.

In 2004, along with eight other silk painters, Karen participated in the show held in Washington, D.C. at the US Botanic Garden. "Orchids- Beauty and Beyond!" was the name of the show and was a product of former SPIN Executive Director, Diane Tuckman's efforts. "I am so grateful to Diane for getting us that show. I'd love to do it again." Karen describes how she and Rick flew to Washington D.C. to attend the show. And she and the other artists engaged the crowds. "We did talks and demonstrations. It was busy

everyday that we were there. I would look up, and there were lines flowing out the doors.”

As a result of the success of this show, she and three other artists formed a group, Silk Synergy, which has continued to display silk banners at other orchid shows.

Karen has found a way to eliminate the tedious gutta lines. She does not use gutta to contain the dyes. Instead, she uses a laundry fabric finish sizing that she sprays onto the silk fabric. Saturating the stretched silk with this spray-on sizing, she first

some of these other treatments, Karen’s method doesn’t affect the intensity of the dye color. In fact, the vibrancy of the dyes seems to be enhanced. “As the dyes remain more concentrated when they do not flow, the colors are so rich, deep and beautiful. You can use salt and alcohol techniques. They have their own unique quality, though. It’s not quite the same as on untreated silk.” After steaming, the sizing rinses right out.

She then mounts her art onto prepared canvas, adhering the silk to the canvas using a matte medium varnish. She learned this mounting



“Stephen

allows the silk to dry. She then transfers her pattern that she has drawn onto drafter’s paper onto the silk using a refillable pen filled with sizing that has been tinted with black dye. Then she applies her colors using Jacquard red label dyes. The sizing application fills the fibers of the silk. She describes this as a watercolor effect. “The paint doesn’t flow in quite the same way as on untreated silk.” Karen uses a scrubbing motion to move and blend the dyes on the silk.

This method is similar to other methods that stop the dyes from flowing onto silk. However, unlike

technique from friend and fellow silk painter, Sandra Kay Johnson and Sandra’s book, “My Silk Painting and Mounting Process.” She dilutes the matte medium 50 percent with water. She cautions not to put too much of the varnish on the silk. She also describes the varnish as further enhancing the color. “When the varnish touches the silk, it intensifies the colors even more. The colors are similar to what the dyes look like when the silk is wet.”

Regarding the raging debate among silk artists about mounting silk in such a way that the silk is



permanently altered, Karen sighs. "I know there is disagreement over how silk should be presented. I have framed some of my pieces. Framing is so expensive, though. You have to find a reputable framer who knows what they're doing. I would prefer that the client be able to focus on the painting cost, rather than having to dedicate a huge portion to the framing. And it sells really well!"

Mounting the silk in the center of canvas, Karen leaves a border of canvas to "frame" the work. "I think it sells so well because it's very different. It looks like it's floating on the wall."

Karen's presentation of her work is less expensive and does not negatively impact the beauty of the work. In fact, three galleries currently represent her. Clearly neither the galleries nor her customers mind. Even in the current economy, she's doing okay. "Sales have gone down. I've still gotten commissions and I'm teaching classes. It's going along."

Her works are usually named for people. Does this have some significance? "I started the very first



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one in honor of their support for me and it grew from there."

In addition to doing her paintings, she also teaches in her studio. Sometimes, her studio attracts more than just students. "It has become a meeting place. People come and we talk. People talk about many different things. It's becoming very spiritual."

While some artists worry about giving away too much or having their work or ideas stolen, Karen gives freely. She shares her knowledge, her experience and her time. If she's learned something from someone else, she shares this too. "I'm thrilled to share. "It's good for the soul."



When asked if she has any advice for other aspiring silk painters, she replies, "Experiment is the whole thing. Don't be discouraged. Keep painting. Go with the flow. And go with your heart."

According to Karen, she's living her dreams. "I am as infatuated with silk art, as I was the first time I touched my brush to silk more than 20 years ago. The blending of brilliant dyes on luxurious silk has captured my attention and I never want to let go!" Let's hope she never does.

If you want to know the products Karen uses, contact her through her website where you can also view class information, projects, and a student's gallery at www.karensistekstudio.com.