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STUDIO JUNE 7, 2021 BARBARA MACADAM

## Rosy Keyser on Sound, Collaboration, and “Arp 273”



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

**Rosy Keyser, Detail of *Window Swap*, 2020. Aluminum, enamel, sawdust, horsehair, and paper on canvas.**

At 46, Baltimore-born painter Rosy Keyser has brightened her palette and expanded her purview northward, probing the cosmos with images of abstract celestial bodies rendered in their magnetic relation to one another. On earth, she has been turning sound into substance and is working with cast paper to mimic and sensualize the effect of corrugated steel, a longtime, versatile favorite medium of hers.

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Keyser, who earned her BFA at Cornell in 1997 and her MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2003 and works in Brooklyn and rural Medusa, New York, has ranged widely in her artistic practice and appreciations, drawing from the rather straightforward landscape paintings of Eugene (Bud) Leake, whom she met in a barn in rural Maryland, and who subsequently taught her about color and distance, to the poetry, color, and sadness in Paul Klee and **Edvard Munch**, and the abstract graphic painting of Victor Kord and the striking confounding toughness of Art Brut.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST & PARRASCH HEIJNEN.

**Rosy Keyser, *Window Swap*, 2020. Aluminum, enamel, sawdust, horsehair, and paper on canvas.**

Ultimately, Keyser is an agile navigator of the in-between; She operates in the shifting realm between the cosmos and deep earth, between the poetic and lyrical, and the gruff and impenetrable.

Most of all, she aims to make concrete the ineffable, the nonphysical, the relational, the emotional, the sense-based—sound, feel, smell, etc. And she wants to do the reverse—unsolidifying and unraveling the known, showing what can't be defined.

In an essay for a zine created in conjunction with her current show at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery in LA, on view through August 7, Jenny Monick wrote of how “our descriptions’ willingness to collaborate one’s parts, of aspects, and of bodies and where they happen, when, and what they are made of, and of space and the in-between of bardos.” **The bardo**, following Buddhism, is “an intermediate, transitional, or liminal state between death and rebirth.”

In Keyser’s work, life and **death** are in continual dynamic play. Forms change appearance and relation to one another alternating between solid and ephemeral, between composed and agitated. Keyser continually translates one material or medium into an ever-fluctuating message.

On the walls of her Brooklyn studio are photos from a zine documenting the subject of her current exhibition, at Parrasch Heijnen. The show's title *Arp 273* refers to a pair of interacting galaxies—one fell through the other 300 light-years away. The idea behind how forms fall into and through one another, affecting their positions and holding them in a relationship through dynamic is based on the research of astronomer Halton Arp who, in his 1966 *Atlas of Peculiar Galaxies*, described how this event happened and the pair’s uncanny resemblance to a **rose** and its stem.

To illustrate the idea, she tells how she and her fourteen-year-old son, Winslow, have been making paintings together at home. “After we’ve dropped ink on paper,” she tells *Art & Object*, “we wonder about all of the things it could be. It’s an exercise in holding things loosely enough that they could be more than one thing, not to foreclose on form, and then discuss what they could be--it’s about forms collaborating aspects and influencing each other.” It’s also about how someone could throw something into a field of people and affect something major through a violent act, or conversely, proliferate love.

Among the images in the show is a drawing that the legendary installation artist Paul Thek, who died of AIDS in 1988, made for Susan Sontag together with and a letter he sent to her. Both are currently held by UCLA in the Young Research Library.



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**Rosy Keyser, *Roughshodder*, 2021. Oil, medium, pastel, and sawdust on waxed canvas.**

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Keyser relates that “Sontag wanted Thek to have a baby with her. He said, No.” At one point, she says, he wanted to marry Sontag. “They needed and loved each other. They shifted each other’s positions. They had this complicated love for each other. I thought having those two letters together in the show would be a beautiful tactile way of considering this relationship: He sent the letter, she opened it. It was something they both held. To me, that’s sort of like those two galaxies.”

She points out, sitting on a shelf, some old braille cards of life under the sea. “I was thinking,” Keyser says, “of braille and tactile symbols. There’s a different metric with a felt language.”

She explains, “I’m working in collaboration with a nineteen-year-old blind musician, Matthew Whitaker. We started working together because a friend of mine had done a segment on him for *60 Minutes*. Doctors scanned Matthew’s brain and found that when he’s playing music or stimulated by music that he liked, the visual cortex lit up. It made me wonder if he was using that part of his brain for extra-auditory perception.



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**Rosy Keyser, *I Want to Fuck a Mountain*, 2021. Acrylic, enamel, oil, pastel, and cast papercrete on canvas.**

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To help her understand, they worked together to turn a mound of clay into a tactile tablet of built forms. “I thought of it as a composition—a variation on an early topographical reverb plate. Instead of throwing sound at it to understand the acoustic space, it could be used as voltage to change the shape of the music.”

“I thought it resembled a kind of composition, and we cast it in bronze so we could use it for voltage and to generate new sounds by pushing established tracks across it.” She adds, “I thought, if we could make a new sound based on a physical form made by Matthew, we could go back to the very beginning of the process to better understand how he uses the visual part of his brain for auditory processing and creation.”

Keyser shows me the bronze cast of the tablet, which was made using clay, impressions of corduroy, a dimpled camping mat, and fingers. “The stacks of oblong earth mounds that Matthew built were like a song made physical,” she explains.

She is curious to understand how he thinks about volume and space and how he perceives color, and what roles these play in his music. She tries to connect temperature with **color**, for example, asking him whether his skin felt different—warmer or cooler—when standing next to the red or blue, for example, in a stained-glass window. And she wants him to consider how he conceives of volume and space.

For Keyser, everything is connected. Music and poetry, science and art, magic, mystery, and the mechanics of the world. Everything can mean and act on everything else. Corrugated structures and sawdust that can look like gold, for example, change optics and meaning. It’s all Keyserian alchemy.

Keyser is currently in two exhibitions: the L.A. show *Arp 273* on view at Parrasch Heijnen June 26-August 7, and in New York, the aptly titled *Keyser & Montgomery: Wrecked Angle*, which features work by Keyser and Joe Montgomery, at Ceysson et Benetiere Gallery June 18-July 31.