

ARTnews

Rosy Keyser's Sculptures Create Stories That Never End

BY BARBARA A. MACADAM

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Tall, regal, and a trifle tomboyish with short, blond-streaked hair, **Rosy Keyser** arrived for an opening of a **group show** she was in at **Halsey McKay Gallery** in East Hampton, New York, dressed in cut-off-at-the-knees shorts, checkered high-top sneakers, and stretchy gold suspenders. The getup was a perfect segue into her art.



ROSY KEYSER IN HER BROOKLYN STUDIO. BRITT WINTERER

Balancing the formal and the irrational, Keyser probes the raw, wild, natural world—along with the historical, the fictive, and the emotional realms.

She sets out the props for a mystery narrative—or a treasure hunt—leaving clues embedded in her paintings and constructions, which are much the same thing. The props can be as random as provocative bits of rope, wire, flies caught in enamel, sawdust, charred wood, corrugated steel, and polycarbonate. It's for us to conceive the story and construct the plot. Call it raw realism—real pieces of nature, of the past, and of the imagination become the abstract components of a larger reality and of an intense, shifting psychological composition.

As **Eric Crosby**, who, with **Bartholomew Ryan**, curated “**Painter Painter**” at the **Walker Art Center** in Minneapolis last spring, remarks, “Keyser’s work is at odds with so much painting we see today. It strikes me as a force of nature. It’s about harnessing the elements.” He adds, “For me it’s a tidal force that the work promises—conversations about the status of the image.”

The show included 15 artists dealing with varieties of abstraction and the ways in which painting has been reaching beyond the canvas. Crosby points out how Keyser “is using large stretchers that operate as a kind of grid that she operates with and against. It comes from a formal consideration—a focused, formal sense.”

The 39-year-old artist is very much an American, born and raised in rural Maryland, and imbued with a sense of history and a familiarity with the landscape. She grew up near the Pennsylvania border and went to school in Baltimore. Keyser remembers how she and her siblings would rise early to do chores, “walking with a flashlight braced under my chin, carrying buckets up the hill to the barn before daylight.” After that, the family would drive to school through burned-out parts of Baltimore, and then head “back to the country and to copperheads and dirt.”

All of those experiences and all of those materials continue to animate her work. Even today, she says, she goes out by the Gowanus Canal near her Brooklyn studio and burns sticks for her works. There’s a parallel, she points out, between her growing up in the country and going to school in the city and her use of atmospheric spray paint and unrefined sandpaper. Keyser now lives in both Brooklyn and the tiny hamlet of Medusa, New York, along with her husband, Britt Winterer, and their six-year-old son, Winslow.

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For some recent pieces, “I scavenged for corrugated steel in Upstate New York, where the steel had been left for decades in tangled piles to decay. I borrowed it to resuscitate it,” the artist says. “Part of the thrill was trying not to get caught throwing it into the truck.” Her attraction to the corrugated material, she says, was based on what she saw as its “built-in analog quality.” It calls to mind a rib cage and a pulse. “If you add a flat plane behind the material,” she says, “there’s room in the spaces in between allowing it to expose a transitional moment. And, if you tilt it, it has a rogue, unpredictable happening.”

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Big Sugar Sea Wall, 2012. “I scavenged for corrugated steel in Upstate New York,” Keyser recalls. “I borrowed it to resuscitate it.” GENE PITTMAN/COURTESY WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS

So there’s the element of chance and the potential for motion in these very basic components. And there is also a connection with the human body. Keyser doesn’t conceal a certain vulnerability and a sense of the body itself gone rogue. Anatomical rhythms are an undercurrent in the work: breathing, pain, endurance, and “sweat and blood,” she points out. There’s a palpable

poignancy in all of this. Keyser's father, with whom she was very close, died two days before she turned 13. "He gave me an easel before he died," she recalls.

Keyser studied at Cornell University, and took art classes with, among others, **Victor Kord**, whose work in a faculty show called "Dog Soup" made a lasting impression on her. "It was a distilled and brilliant coupling of the organized and the abstract," she remembers. Using a "simple grid with colored dots," his work exemplified a freedom to attribute abstract ideas to firmly planted materials. "Kord was my bridge to abstraction," says Keyser, whose work was more figurative at the time.

In 1997, after graduating from Cornell, she moved to New York, and then lived for a year in East Palo Alto, California, while her husband was attending graduate school. "I admired the lifestyle there—drinking beer and fixing cars," Keyser says. "I started painting engines; I was interested in car culture. I was making big paintings using heavy marine paint." From the start, even her titles were striking—at once poetic, tough, witty, and enigmatic. Keyser went on to earn her M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she increasingly experimented with the boundaries of painting, adding elements from nature and ceramic fragments.

She returned to New York in 2003 and participated in several group shows. In 2007, she was part of "**Stubborn Materials**" at **Peter Blum Gallery** in New York, curated by Simone Subal. Among the eight artists in that pivotal show were **Larry Bamburg**, **Ian Pedigo**, and **Jutta Koether**, all of whose art had ersatz primitive and personal architectural characteristics, a build-your-own-world style. Keyser continued to show with the gallery until last year, and her exhibitions there bore such titles as "**Promethean Dub**," "**The Moon Ate Me**," and "**Rivers Burn and Run Backward**."

In last year's "**Medusa Pie Country**," Keyser's engagement with music played into the schemes of her pieces—as inspiration, rhythm, invention, and imaginative grit. One work, ***Mnemonic Land Device (For Blind Willie McTell)***—consisting of cardboard, palm mat, enamel, wire, and steel—has a geometric structure of triangles and rectangles and grids, looking altogether like a building complex or a primitive harp "with one foot in the past and one lit by illusory LED lights," as Keyser describes the composition. It turns out to have begun as a bisected canvas stretcher.

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She says the piece is an homage to McTell, “a musician who played in the Piedmont style and wrote music in Braille.” Other works from that show—with titles such as *Saturday Nite Special* and *A Blind Torpedo Walks into a Bar*, which features broken bottle tops—refer to a stripped-down era of making powerful music with very little. These paintings pay tribute to down-home Southern music—the cadence, the culture, the stories. Like the musicians, Keyser is a natural storyteller, at once allusive and illusive.



One of Keyser's recent tributes to down-home Southern music: *A Blind Torpedo Walks into a Bar*, 2013, raffia, enamel, glass, wood, and basket.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

The techniques she devises to manipulate her found materials are like the ones children come up with when inventing imaginary worlds. She paints on floor mats and then prints those "images" onto canvas, sometimes leaving the paint from the original surface to create another surface that can then be moved, and so on. As such, parts of one painting can be embedded in another. The story never ends; chapter follows upon chapter. Keyser likens the process to making "sparks jump between works."

The process is analagous to folk music and the way rhythms, melodies, and lyrics are shared and then riffed on as they leap from musician to musician.

Eclecticism pervades Keyser's tastes and processes. On the one hand, she celebrates the spirit, spontaneity, and originality of **Rauschenberg's Combines**; on the other, she reveals that she was "blown away" by the beauty of some of Helen Frankenthaler's lyrical paintings. Keyser's brutalism—or, "Neo Brut," as she has called it—is of an expressionistic variety and evokes the European tradition of artists like Antoni Tàpies. Ironically, much of her work, in all its toughness, calls to mind American patchwork quilts, in which the pieces are continually reused and recombined, creating new visual narratives as well as a sense of comfort and disorientation.

The patchwork of styles and genres she draws on includes, at the very least, arte povera, Minimalism, Pop art, Abstract Expressionism, and Constructivism, in no particular order. The corrugation in Keyser's materials reminds her of "the eye's way of organizing space—not unlike Agnes Martin's grids," she says. "Only these are ready-made, and from there, I can make a more fugitive event out of marks."

She is very much involved with the contemporary-poetry scene, and at the same time draws from T. S. Eliot, alluding to "The Waste Land," and noting how it represents "the segue from Imagism into modernism." And she is currently immersed in David Foster Wallace's essays, with their linguistic variations and digressions—all grist for her art.

Keyser's constructions and their fixings protrude from the walls of her Brooklyn studio and are strewn across the floor—corrugated metal and

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plastic, tar, wires, rope, and fencing—establishing a kind of wilderness of materials. One artwork dangling awkwardly from the wall is called Double Rainbow. It's shaped like shark teeth but also has a wick and a rope, suggesting self-combustibility.



Smithson, 2005, enamel, vinyl, and reflectors on canvas. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Material qualities, Keyser emphasizes, are most important to her—she doesn't begin with philosophical or theoretical plans. "I'll make something and then I'll understand the relationship later," she says. "The physical may be allied with a literary idea, for example. When these seemingly oblique alliances take

hold, I try to trust that, in the end, they will inform each other. I like odd couples.”

She recently finished a project in association with **Karma**, the New York bookstore/gallery/small press owned by **Brendan Dugan**, which involved an exhibition and the publication of an artist’s book titled ***My Heads Are My Hands***. A monograph devoted to Keyser’s work was just released by **Karma**. And the artist is in a five-person show titled “Maximalism” that will open at **Contemporary Fine Arts Berlin** in May. (Prices for her work range from \$15,000 to \$75,000.)

Other recent activities include her participation last May in **an exhibition** at the **Zabludowicz Collection** in London as well as the show at Halsey McKay Gallery. But it was a **2010–11 exhibition** at **Ballroom Marfa** in remote West Texas that Keyser says really had a big impact on the way she thinks about “the reflexive qualities of matter and atmosphere where familiar landmarks are scarce.”

At the heart of it all, Keyser says, is the belief that “everything is in flux, as a constant.” In some works there will be, for example, a solid area that emphasizes the sense of agitation above it. Often circles and lines suggest continuing processes—referring to ritual and renewal. Her tough-but-romantic abstractions are often as beautiful as they are ungainly, informed by both sadness and wit, as in her tangle of burnt-looking material hanging from a windowlike frame in ***Eve’s First Confusion Between Penises and Snakes*** (2012).

Matthew Day Jackson included *Eve’s First Confusion* in “**Science on the back end**,” a show he curated at **Hauser & Wirth** in New York a couple of years ago.

“Rosy’s work,” Jackson says, “forces me to consider the history of abstraction, the idea of gesture, and finally a conversation of decay through creating a palimpsest,” he adds. “The level of inventiveness and playfulness in her work is startling as it feels more like a struggle of life and death. The work is deeply romantic, and lacks any notion of frivolity. Her intensity is one with which I have to reckon.”

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