

January, 2007

Featured Artist of the Month

Karen Leeds

By Carol L. Zack

(Borrowed from the website of Karen Leeds)

"I use painting to explore & express; it's where I lose myself but find my way.

In a world that grows more complex by the minute, I yearn for simplicity and clarity – the way light falls upon a decaying leaf or leans against an abstract symbol. I'm deeply attracted to color, shapes, texture & forms, which become vehicles for integrating experience with perception." Karen Leeds

<http://www.karenleeds.com>



Karen Leeds is a painter, focusing primarily on vivid abstract imagery to express complex emotions and feelings. Her current mediums include acrylic on canvas, oil pastel on paper, and French dyes on silk. Her working studio is in Scottsdale, Arizona, where she also facilitates sessions on "Art, Courage & Creativity" for adults making art, often for the first time

An emerging artist, Karen did not begin painting until she was into her 40's. Primarily self-taught, Ms. Leeds won the 2003 "Undiscovered Artist" competition sponsored by the Scottsdale Gallery Association and East Valley Tribune, which resulted in her first solo gallery show. Since that time she has received other honors and been included in several juried exhibitions. Her studio was included on the SMOCA (Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art)'s 2006 Working Artist Tour. She currently has patrons throughout the United States and Canada.



Karen, shown here, teaching her students in Scottsdale, AZ.





"In The Grass"
Oil Pastel/2005
11" x 14"
100 pound Bristol
Smooth Paper

Karen, you are working in several mediums, acrylic on canvas, French dyes on silk and oil pastel on paper. How did you discover oil pastels, what type do you use, and what attracts you to them?

Great Question! I was looking for a way to do art when I was traveling on the road, something that would be easy to carry, and easy to set up. My first experience with oil pastel was with student grade craypas and was a disaster! Right from the beginning, I was drawn to using oil pastels almost like finger paints, and I rubbed my fingers raw that day. I remember feeling frustrated, disappointed and discouraged. I knew that something was trying to come out and I assumed that I simply wasn't experienced or good enough to bring it forth. Being a novice in general who was only exposed to the world of acrylic at that time, I wasn't yet familiar with mediums like turpinoid. Several months later, I learned that I could use these to make it easier to spread the pastels. I was elated! I went nuts with my first painting after that discovery, using hands, feet (yes, feet!) and several pieces of paper. I sold the results almost immediately. This encouraged me to keep exploring oil pastels and I finally realized that if you buy superior oil pastels, you can move them around without using any medium. This was very exciting. At that point, I had been able to find very little information about oil pastels and technique, so it was always about plunging in, exploring and inventing as I went.

As far as brands, so far I use Sennelier the most, and also Holbein, because I find these to be very rich and creamy, and easy to move. In my experience, Sennelier has a waxier, clumping-like characteristic which has added interesting texturing effects to recent pictures. Holbein tends to go on more solidly. I only use smooth or hot-pressed paper so that my surfaces are quite slick and enable me to rub the way I like. Recently a student of mine made a great observation: Oil pastels are wonderful because there doesn't have to be a brush between you and the medium, it's so tactile. I would love to hear recommendations from other members for quality brands that they like.

Your work is seemingly spontaneous and appears almost musical in nature. Is there a connection? I was also curious about your approach. Do you start your paintings knowing what you want to create, or do you let your immediate emotions dictate the look and feel of your work as the single driving force?

What a lovely thing to say. Interesting too as I was a musician working in sales & marketing in the music industry for years, and a poet -- long before I emerged as a visual artist in a "mid-life" awakening. But I don't necessarily have music on while I work. In fact I often work in silence. And my work IS usually completely spontaneous. This is what I also facilitate others to do; to jump in blind, grab the colors that are calling in that moment and start laying down shapes. Inevitably the painting takes on a life of its own and a dialogue begins between the painter and the piece of work. This takes courage and a willingness to tone down voices in the head. I have to stop worrying about "being good" and allow myself to go with non-verbalized feelings. Don't get me wrong. I do believe that it is important to be able to sketch out a composition, to be able to access both the left and right side of the brain and to balance yin with yang. It's important to master technique and design principals and I work on this all the time. I just happen to flow more naturally towards abstraction and loose spontaneity. I have observed that we all tend to have instincts about pleasing and effective compositions. Sometimes the real challenge is letting go of control and allowing very deep and personal authenticity to emerge.

Here's a practical question for you. How do you protect your oil pastel art work? Does living in the hot desert climate cause you to treat your work differently prior to selling or exhibiting your work?

They say that oil pastel never truly dries but try living in a dry desert that sometimes hits over 120F in the summer! It is a challenge though, and so far I've had to frame all my serious work under glass to protect it from dust and scratching. In the past I've often used the Sennelier oil pastel fixative although lately I've simply let pieces dry out on their own. I've also learned recently that this fixative is no longer even available. I would be very curious to hear what other people are doing. I find that putting my pieces behind glass takes away from their beauty. I'd love to find a way to varnish the surface in some fashion that would be archival in nature and allow me to frame without any kind of barrier like Plexiglas or glass.

Karen, in your painting called "Don't Leave", what is the significance of that title? As I look at the painting, I conger up a ghostly apparition as the subject of the painting, based on the title. Tell us how you created this painting, and how you came to title it.

Like most of my work, I had no plan when I painted this. I'm usually mystified and surprised myself by what evolves in a composition. I always name the art afterwards based upon the impressions that it leaves on me. So I saw hints of abandonment and love, although the larger figure looks like my dearest friend, Ellen who still is a big part of my life after 28 years! So it has to do with friendship, somehow too. As mentioned earlier, I was a poet long before I became a visual artist so the names of my paintings are important, a part of their final statement. On the other hand, the title for the painting "I Have No Idea" was derived when I asked someone else what I should call that particular piece and that was their reply! One patron sees a sitting Buddha in that one ("I Have No Idea") -- someone else sees the silhouette of their recently deceased mother. A third person see's a fetus curled up in a womb. I love that people see so many different images in my work. When I'm done with a piece, I'm out of the way. I'm just as curious about what presents as everyone else is.



*"Don't Leave"
Oil Pastel/2005
11" x 14"
100 pound Bristol Smooth Paper*

Karen, I see you have chosen 100 lb. Bristol Smooth Paper to create your art work. What are the qualities that you like about the Bristol paper?

Most of the time I now use 140 pound hot pressed water color paper (Artistico extra white) but the reason for either choice is the smooth surface with a significant weight and strength. This enables me to work the pastels with my fingers fairly easily.



***"I Have No Idea"
Oil Pastel/2005
11" x 14"
100 pound Bristol
Smooth Paper***

Also, can you tell us how you apply the oil pastel? And if you use or combine different mediums, how do you usually proceed?

I apply base coats thick by hand and use a lot of force when rubbing and blending edges. I rarely use any medium; I depend on the richness of the brand and a lot of very hard pressure. I do end up with significant overlay, and sometimes scrape into this to reveal patterns underneath with metal woodworking combs and wooden barbecue skewers. The latter acts as sharp edged "pens" to carve out designs. Sometimes I use rubber finger cots to create interesting textures. Also, once the pastel begins to set-up and become tackier, I can achieve certain effects and textures by clumping and lifting, again with finger pressure or by using paper shop towels, which are softer than regular paper towels. Sennelier used to make a 24 piece assortment of irridescent which were wonderful to use for special effects. Now all I can find are 12 piece boxes. Does anyone know of a source for the larger assortment??



*"Pastel Flare"
Oil Pastel/2005
11" x 14"
100 pound Bristol
Smooth Paper*

Your Painting "Pastel Flare" is a wonderful combination of color, and energetic strokes. Approximately how long does it take to create a painting with this kind of approach?

This piece is a perfect example of a lot of layering and different rubbing motions. I usually start a piece by laying down pastel in a circular fashion. The flaring here resulted from a lot of layers created first in this manner, then pushed upward with thumbs. Some of the composition was created by lifting some of the color that had already set-up as mentioned earlier. "Pastel Flare" started out totally different then how it ended up... It took about 12 hours, I think.



*"Rachel's Room"
Mixed Media using
Oil Pastel/2005
11" x 14"
100 pound Bristol
Smooth Paper*

I noticed on your website that you offer a wide range of classes. Tell us how you got involved in teaching and what aspect of the work do you find to be the most successful? Do you do anything more to market your classes other than on your website?

When I first started painting in acrylic, a significant teacher and mentor very light-heartedly said something to me at a key moment when I was stuck. She told me "not to worry about being good. Just put down what you feel." This released a flood of creativity for me that was life changing. The experience was so powerful that I've wanted to pass it on to others, especially when they express a desire to do something but feel a lack of artistic ability. That's how "Art, Courage & Creativity" was born. I don't really teach (I'm not sure that I'm qualified!) although I share all of my oil pastel techniques. What I do is help people to find their own unique voices. I work right along side with them, going through everything that they do. I create the right environment and then give them "permission" to play and explore. Oil pastels really lend themselves to this kind of process. 40% of my students buy quality oil pastels after their sessions and continue on with art. Many come back for more sessions. Some of them are now in galleries and offer their own version of the class! This is pretty exciting. To me, this experience is spiritual in nature and has as much to do with belief systems, life strategies and psychology, as it does with creating art.

Making art becomes a way to see how we approach life. If we can overcome inhibitions here, maybe we can create new neuro-pathways in the brain that help us to overcome them elsewhere in life.

I first offered these sessions on site at the Arizona Fine Arts Expo, a 3 month long art show under tents in Scottsdale, Arizona. This is a show with 125 artists working on location in their own galleries and was a wonderful environment to nurture novices. This show gets a lot of traffic in 73 days! It was so successful that I started offering the sessions in my studio. I also take it on the road and right into people's homes. I have an extensive mailing list at this point so I market through mass emails and word of mouth. I'm not shy; I'll talk about it to strangers in stores if it feels like it will be meaningful to them.

You say you are primarily self-taught, but we all admire and study artists that often have profound influences on our work. Can you tell what or who inspires you, or do you have a mentor you enjoy working with?

I love Kandinsky and a contemporary Chinese painter named Chi Gan Pan for their use of color. Chi Gan Pan's work is a gorgeous blend of organic and geometric shapes and forms, suggestive of space and spiritual dimensions. To be able to sit at the feet of Hans Hoffman when he was alive and teaching would have been one of my wishes. I've had wonderful teachers at the local community college, a very talented artist & teacher named Robert You, and Gloria Gaddis who I mentioned earlier. I long for a living mentor right now who can help me break through to the next level with my abstracts.

Karen thanks so much for taking the time to answer my questions about oil pastel and provide examples of your work. It is always enjoyable and enlightening to see how artists express themselves using oil pastel. Is there anything else you would like to add or share that would offer support to other oil pastel artists?

I am thrilled to find an organization that recognizes the substantial opportunities that this medium has to offer and grateful to be a part of it. I feel that I have so much to learn about it still! I welcome suggestions and questions from other members.

Karen says: "Being creative takes courage. It's not about talent. Anyone can be taught to draw, paint, dance, and write. It's about giving your self permission to feel. It's about the willingness to be authentic and truly who you are. This growth process contributes to a compassionate, enlightened society. A healthy culture recognizes the importance of self-expression, and is committed to supporting its arts."

To see more of Karen's work, or to communicate with her, check out her website at www.karenleeds.com