

The Painter Margaret Kelley

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translated from the German

Margaret Kelley's body of work presents an important and convincing art which reflects precisely in its state of abstraction the aberrations of contemporary human life. With great confidence and sovereignty she has devoted herself to this theme, painting colossal paintings up to 240 feet of length experimenting with formats and techniques to state her position ever more precisely. This gigantic epos of forms and colors follows no fashion, has no precursors, is entirely original and has nothing to do with any kind of artistic cliché. Her work is instructive with quiet reserve, born from an invisible power but of an enormous steadiness and intensity of life. In a tremendous exertion of physical strength she has proved over and over again the gravity of her position. Her paintings are complicated, because the situations of life are, because emotions do not tolerate as a model a clear line of direction or monochromatic color schemes. Margaret Kelley offers no philosophy of life; she is not one who communicates in order to force an opinion. She is shy like someone who is hiding a wound. And yet she feels and participates all the more intensely and is without any trace of artifice, because she has come face to face with the deepest depths. The balance of a life which has no reference to a constant truth and which recognizes equilibrium only in the relativity of its standpoints is extremely precarious. The movement between highs and lows, between harmony and crises has created a serious painter who invests herself totally. Her work is without incompleteness or concessions. Each of her paintings reveal the large dimensions of a soul that carefully singles out the concerns of human existence in contemporary situations and raises them to a visual form; above all, the search for truth which is born only out of the contradictions of life. The sovereignty with the handling of painting resources and the great balance between the formal aesthetic and colorful passages in her work from the smallest format up to the most colossal make her work ultimately important and to truly great art.

In order to comprehend and interpret the paintings of Margaret Kelley in their boldness, their originality and their matter of concern, one has to go beyond any customary visual frameworks in order to adopt an entirely different way of viewing art. It is difficult to measure her work according to the criteria of European contemporary art or even to try to integrate it: too different are the coordinates, too unorthodox and seemingly free from any kind of influences. Comparisons to American color field painting or abstract expressionism give clues but no solution. The attempt which can be seen clearly in each of her works to communicate about the actual experience, itself, rather than about the experienced gives her art a different direction and depth. That is a part of her sovereignty but also her solitary position.

The painter who was born in Los Angeles has lived for many years in Germany. Her biography describes not only the situation of existing between two cultures but also moving beyond the restraints of these cultures. Her work developed before the background of these cultural and visual contrasts. Describing her childhood, the artist explains: "I grew up in southern California suburbia—a broad, horizontal landscape so structured that I could easily imagine an horizon lines where the San Gabriel foothills touch the coastal basin; even the clouds floated orderly in the sky, seldom menacing, and railroad tracks nicely The world of her childhood was well-ordered, marked with a linear perspective and demonstrated vanishing points at the horizon as though to teach a lesson in perspective." seemed transparent. Life passed without surprises and though the typical American Calvinistic belief in self-determination initially remained unchallenged, Margaret Kelley began to perceive it differently. She attempted to escape the monotony of daily life through intensive reading and discovered very early the contradiction between the surface and the undercurrents of any given moment. Nothing was as it seemed and nothing seemed to be as it really was. She began to distrust outward appearances and perceived at a young age another reality—a new, equally real, existing world--which was set off from the external world. That disturbing duality cast the question of truth for the first time. >From the beginning she was searching for a language with which she could explore deeper into the forbidden—the unspeakable. Along with her decision to study art, she continued to study German at the university as well. According to the artist: "Though there was no point in studying German---at the time, the effort seemed absolutely senseless, if not absurd--I chose to do so to have something to hold on to, something I hoped would be steadfast as I entrenched myself deeper and deeper into questions of the formal aesthetic of art

rapidly losing my equilibrium. The answers changed as quickly as my skills grew, and there was no constant truth—no one theory--to rely on. Yet the German language supported my painting with its similarities; both—the language and paintings--are highly complicated, multilayered and unusually descriptive. With their help, I would eventually find my voice attaining the means to express or explore themes I would have never dared even to think about in my mother tongue.” And yet the problem remained about the multifaceted nature of reality. Who decides what is true at any given moment? The strongest? The majority? Those in power? Or those with the loudest voices?

Exactly this would become her aesthetic formal problem after five years of academic training: how can one create a painting that expressed something true about reality? The portrayal of appearances couldn't possibly be the solution, because that mirrors, at most, the surface. In addition, a landscape or person changes in the very moment a representation of it is captured, so that the static painting immediately becomes untrue. The entitlement to truth can only be solved through the portrayal of constant change. But how can a word or mark capture something which in its very marrow consists of change? Can truth in its flux be caught in a painting? And what use is a solitary perspective or interpretation of events? These questions marked her development; they prepared the groundwork for an artistic existence, towards which her life seemed unlikely to have pointed her, but which announced itself through the constant questioning about the existence of claimed truths. Because it seemed to her that the very essence of truth was free from words, Margaret Kelley held tight to the conviction that art can be an instrument for the sensory pursuit of truth. Already in her academy period, she set great store by this—her own—demands on art. She searched for marks which described situations of life which in their complexity could not hold their ground in the face of unambiguity. This attempt to reconcile fragile traces of dualities was apparent from the beginning in her work: separation and harmony, constancy and fragility, fear and euphoria, the past and the actual moment. Her own situation was and remains complicated; the inner and outer necessities that determined her life allowed no peaceful development and gave something expressive and eruptive to her art from the very beginning.

In 1979 she accepted a graduate fellowship—a privately funded scholastic grant-- through Rotary International and came to Europe to continue her studies of art at the Munich Art Academy. She looked back from Europe towards the world from which she came and which could be resurrected in memory and rediscovered pictorially in the magnitude of its effect and in its ability to evoke expression. The impressions of her new surroundings provided a strong but irritating contrast. The landscape of the Bavarian foothills, the vertical structure of the city and the eminent Alps--all compressed into a subtle and simultaneously complex perception of space demanded a method of pictorial expression. Her biographical situation was mirrored in this new perception of space by a nature perceived as both omnipotent as well as an expression of a psychological energy which needed to be restrained. Her inner and outer world disintegrated into chaos, as custom and trusted rule of behavior lost their meaning in a foreign society. “My prior academic training failed to give me the means to record or even to explore the new aesthetic situation which existed as a duality to all the I have ever trusted and had taken for granted,” the artist confides, adding: “My personal life soon became chaotic, as well, as custom and trusted rules of behavior lost their meaning in a foreign society and, worse, my paintings became meaningless and superficial compared to those of such superior intent I was seeing for the first time in European museum.” She found stability only in the process of pictorially reworking her situation, which gave density to her artistic development and maturity to her painterly style. Margaret Kelley discovered, above all, in this period of great personal doubt the flow of time as reflected in the ever-changing expression of art, which divides and binds, orders and extinguishes artistic measures. She saw truth depicted pictorially and the moment in which it was called to be. Similarly, in the movement of nature and its seasons which hardly existed in the temperate climate of her youth, a message was perceived about the relationship between permanency and passage—the legitimate tragedy in all of natural existence. “The water of the Isar River was changing constantly not only in relation to itself as a fluid property but in relationship to the shore as well,” the artist recalls. “And yet it remained a river. It could seem calm but have strong undercurrents. It could rush and roar in spring and overpower its shores or fade and dry and practically disappear in the heat of summer to reveal stretches of sand. But it always remained a river. I surely could not have survived without the lessons of the Isar.”

Something exists in that it is constantly becoming something else. Therefore its existence is true only through its inconsistency. New shapes and formulations had to be found to express what lay between or over the aspects of human truth: an emotion, a feeling that can make even a seemingly unambiguous situation

incredibly complex. Carried by the current of the Isar, Margaret Kelley travelled down the river in an old rubber inflatable boat while she drew a long leporello of marks as she observed the constantly changing movement of the water around her. Through these marks based on the fluidity of the Isar she found a way to symbolize a feeling, a restless thought that has no goal but only movement. Such a thought is distinguished with tension, disharmony and fractures. It turns towards no one subject but, rather, to a complex situation.

In 1985 Margaret Kelley returned to the United States and completed her Master of Fine Arts at the California State University in Long Beach under the direction of John Lincoln, a Californian artist known for his mastery of line. According to the artist: "After my return to Los Angeles and the physical separation from the landscape which had both confused and inspired me, I found the marks and shapes which had derived from the various landscapes in Europe to be an essential part of my drawing vocabulary. Indeed," the artist recalls, "these marks and shapes, if allowed, were capable of expressing another kind of landscape—an emotional landscape calling on the experiences I had had in the six years in Munich. Moreover, being that emotion is by nature private, I welcomed the possibility of drawing and painting about questions of such an intimate nature forming a code I thought only I could understand. While art is primarily the work of revealing oneself through aesthetic means, I did not intend to stand entirely naked and helpless before an indifferent audience and be emptied totally by the experience."

Her work now fed off from her memories of experiences in Europe and lived between the play of opposites depicted in variations of visual resources offered by contemporary visual culture. Margaret Kelley's paintings are characterized by their distance from a world of objects which appear to be substantially pushed back in their importance and yet simultaneously remain intact as ideas transformed into a pictorial reality." While the space of Margaret Kelley's paintings remained three-dimensional, the forms within are anchored tightly to the ideas and illusions they represent in their symbolic form. Her marks are expressive; in the vehemence of their encounters or in the fleetingness of their contact, in their dissonance or in their fusion, they build a language which is not just any language but one which has its foundation and truth in the nature of the artist. The language of these marks is emotionally shaped but visually phrased and transcends every private revelation which would limit the paintings to a portrayal of just a single viewpoint or situation.

After her return to Munich in 1985, Margaret Kelley continued her endeavor to pictorially search for a possibility of a reliable truth, however compromised by various standpoints and conflicting points of view. "One Subject, Two Points of View" (1986) displays the rhythmic and impulsive dialogue between two poles, the network of isolation of both positions, which under duress can grow together into a new integrated whole as in, for example, "Foreboding of Freedom" or "Floating Free." In these paintings ribbons of pictorial information on the top and bottom of the surface of the pictorial field offer additional information about the different points of view—it seemed essential to Margaret Kelley that all viewpoints be included. These works reflect the artist's own artistic method born out of the mixture of the river's energy and the attempt to capture complex situations of life in spite of their fluidity. They reveal movements in time and the restless relativity of all forms and their standpoints, which can be driven so far apart that they demand paintings with a length up to 60 feet. "I never express my feelings about Point A or Point B, about this landscape or that person," the artist explains, "but about the energy, tension and the movement back and forth, voluntarily and involuntarily between the two. Since time dictates that nothing be stable, my paintings are about farewells, suspension and the fear, hope, anticipation surrounding a movement in time."

Back in Germany questions about victims and oppressors began to torment Margaret Kelley. She asked: "Are they one and the same? Does a victim become guilty, because he or she has been touched by evil? What about the question of complicity? Who decides the question of responsibility? Does the strongest, the loudest one decide what will be called true? I was so sensitive to the history of Europe that I felt that blood would seep through the asphalt should I dare to scratch it." Beginning with the theme of diametrically opposed opposites but evolving into the question of a possible complicity between a victim and its oppressor while searching for answers regarding guilt and responsibility, the theme of rockets was discovered, which searched to find or were satisfied just imagining a target. The artist adds: "Proud, strong, braggarts-at-heart, they were confident in the knowledge that they were created to become big, puff up and demonstrate an attitude. In the process of the work, these rockets (meanwhile almost figurative in their form) were called to sainthood, because they existed without guilt and acted in the firm belief that they had received a calling." The "Rocket Room" was created inspired by a visit to a Bavarian open air museum where visitors walk

through authentically furnished rooms of prior generations of the country populace. Through peepholes one could observe the “Rocket, Himself,” along with his furniture which facetiously formed a “typical rocket room.” Complete with halos, the rockets appear again as a triptych in artist books travelling on their “Holy Crusades.” They face the mountains in the first crusade and the river in the second with dread and then with peace before they disappear once and for all in 1990 in the “Funeral Procession of the Holy Rockets.”

In 1987 Margaret Kelley returned to the United States and worked for 8 months as an artist-in-residence in Los Angeles where she received a commission for a 240 foot painting for a corporate art collection through the recommendation of the curator Edward Goldman. The painting “Out of the Shadow into the Light of L.A.” describes an ongoing dialogue between the two different realities she had experienced, depicting the conflict between American ideals of self-determination and free will versus ideas of pre-determination, fate and destiny which had permeated her existence in Germany. “How could one possibly know what truth was—where to make a distinction-- in a shadow land like Germany?” the artist asked. “There is seldom sun to cast a shadow and the borders between things as well as truths remain vague while in California the sun casts its revealing light into the darkest corner sending the guilty scurrying. Or so I thought.” This enormous elongated format allowed a dialogue between past and present, freedom and fate and American and German ways of thinking. At the same time the painting contained the attempt, to bring the experiences the artist had had in Germany into accord with the beliefs, however unreliable, of her childhood.

The question of evil, guilt and the weight of accountability were addressed again as a theme in 1989 in the artist’s loft in downtown Los Angeles in a series of additional paintings which reach back to the paradigm of Adam, Eve and the serpent. The artist employed them as actors tangled in the eternal triangle complicated by passion and guilt and asks about lost innocence and the possibility of a second chance. “Why didn’t Eve receive the chance to say that she was not aware of the severity of the consequences of her actions? That she was sorry?” asks the artist. “Does one ever receive a second chance?” In one painting, Eve believes that she is flying, but she is actually falling. Her ankle is tied to a long cord that the serpent is holding. In an accompanying painting, Eve tangled by the cord is about to be driven by the force of the waves back over the sea. She appears to be no longer living and she makes, in despair, a pact with God.

Margaret Kelley began to paint pictures which were different than all the others that had preceded them. They consisted of simple forms with borders instead of long scrolls of marks that followed one after the other. Several of these forms with strong contours were tied to each other by delicate threads or thin wires into the shape of a cathedral or a house with roof as a symbol of all that offers a sense—albeit a false sense—of security. “Job’s Lament” or “Shattered Faith” were their titles. In their static and inactive state, the first of the new paintings seemed to be born out of a phlegmatic apathy. The only connection between the forms were the fragile contacts of the thin threads until movement was later restored—not wildly as in the earlier phrases—but restrained and calculated. In this body of work Margaret Kelley returns to the transitory, the crossing of boundaries while asking the question how the integrity of the one can be safeguarded in the plural.

In 1991, Margaret Kelley returned to Germany for an additional year accepting a grant from the Atelierhaus in Worpswede, an artist colony in northern Germany near Bremen. In her new studio the artist created the painting “Stranded between Two Shores” to exhibit in the second annual outdoor art fair in Treuchtlingen, in which thirty other artists and sculptors were invited to contribute to that year’s theme “From Bridge to Bridge.” Margaret Kelley’s painting, titled “Stranded between Two Shores,” consisted of eight canvases connected by ropes which hung over the river. The idea behind this large painting would become the catalyst for two decades of work. Whereas the pulsation between the two standpoints remained, it now described the existence between two shores “where you can’t go forward and yet you can’t go backwards, where the water under your feet is as trustworthy as a rug that keeps getting pulled out from under you,” the artist explains, continuing: “and a form develops which comes to represent a weight—your burden—and if you want to survive, you have to throw everything you have overboard to lessen the weight, even that, which you thought you could never live without, so that you can dare to leap so far that you do not know if you can make it and to a shore so strange you do not know if you would want to.”

In the isolation of her Worpswede studio with the view into the dismal moorland she conjured up this leap voluminously in large formats in numerous explorations of “A Leap of Faith.” Vivid formations divide free-hanging canvases with cuts and lines but later harmonize in subsequent works which are furnished with a

kind of tremulous peace that hint at the storm that has taken place. These paintings embody crises and abatement; they preserve moments of tension in large vibrating areas of muted color that characterize this phrase of work. They are devoted to the state of being suspended in air, describing an emotional state of perpetual limbo. The deep calming blue provides a central weight from which shapes step forward glowing of their own accord. A yellow triangle swells like a sail before the blue depth; feelings have clarified themselves and hold chaos at bay. "Not only the flat landscape with its visible horizon but the muted colors of the north clearly influenced the appearance of these paintings," according to the artist. "The former is mirrored by a long driving diagonal line--that represents the leap--while the colors are visibly influenced by the dim northern palette which offers a strong contrast from the harsh, sharply defined colors of southern California."

Back in her loft in downtown Los Angeles, works on paper as well as gobelins--free hanging canvases--with lengths of twenty feet were created for "A Leap of Faith II: the Mountains, the Void and the Abyss." In this body of work, the leap is often blocked by a mountain-like form. As a symbol for all that could threaten a leap with failure, it could be translated literally into distrust or the memory of something that has been left behind. However, the will to leap into the unknown is always stronger and the determination remains as clear as the driving diagonal line which ultimately controls the composition of the painting and determines its order. The words that accompany this period, confides the artist, are "burden--the weight of the past; chasm--that immeasurable deep gulf over which one must dare to leap; and void--the incomprehensively vast space, through which must leap, which need not be more than just a dark, empty-- however intimidating-- inconsequential space in time."

In 1994 the artist ended her voyages between the continents. After a transitional period devoted to a series of 20 foot canvases, the formal aesthetic decision was made to change from gobelins—the free hanging canvases—to wooden boxes in "A Leap of Faith III: The Farewell Letters." The activity, though constrained, can still travel if only around the edges of the box as a symbol of its duration in spite of a further reduction in size. In addition, collages of canvas or newspaper scraps formed boundaries that limited the distance of the now contained leap. "Using scraps of newspaper as a collage to depict the constraining border was a deliberate decision," the artist explains. "Newspaper is the best example of something considered current, although its information becomes the past the very moment it comes into existence. I use it to solve the problem of pictorially representing the constant flux of time." The line which moves horizontally through the farewell letters symbolizes the tear between the past and the present, between German and American mentalities and their realities as well as a suture, that futile attempt to sew two lives into one. Sometimes this scar tears open and is similar to a wound. A triangular form symbolizes the weight of memories and longing from which one must part in order to survive. The leap from one situation into another remains the theme. The act of change carries the weight of the burden of time and experience. This burden, which resembles the triangle that first appeared in "Stranded between Two Shores" in 1991, now attempts to prevent the horizontal leap of fate. The horizontal line strides across the surface of countless paintings which by the mid 90's had grown to a large body of work in which passion attempts to overcome dissonance. Again and again, the leap places itself in position to cross space and time and contradictions, to open wounds in order to close them again.

The transitory, the crossing of boundaries, carry special weight in her work demanding new painterly formulations because there is no one conjoint solution. In "A Leap of Faith IV: Margot's Song and Song of Solomon" the artist returned to this subject of boundaries exploring the same questions addressed in the latter work of "Shattered Faith." Instead of complex interaction, the emphasis is on the question of maintaining integrity focusing and experimenting with only two or three forms which merely touch or cross each other. And, instead of acrylic, oil is used as a medium for the first time.

The subject of crossing boundaries and the inevitability of separation and farewell is addressed again in a "A Leap of Faith V: The Water Was Wide." The boundaries--once so constricting--can be crossed or disappear entirely under opaque layers of oil that contrast with light passages of glazed color. Using transparent layers of color in oil allows the earlier painted forms to remain slightly visible hinting at their existence. Margaret Kelley explains: "Like an archeological site, where one removes layers and layers of stone and earth to reveal cultures from earlier times, the color theoretically could be scraped off to reveal a former version of truth in time. Instead of travelling through the different points of view in a long horizontal stretch, the

paintings now organize matters of time, conflicting points of view and perspective over each other.” The many dialogues between the two points lie underneath the surface—sometimes seen, in part, and often unseen—but there and just as important in its influence. “Until a painting is entirely completed,” the artist has once said: “I have painted many other and often quite successful paintings underneath, in which each in their own represents the passage of time. At the end, though, in this cycle of “A Leap of Faith,” I give a last version a sense of architecture, a final form. That is how it is in life. We all create our own worlds, even if it is only the futile attempt to achieve a comforting appearance of false stability. In this period of my work, I have allowed myself to finally have a point of view and to show it, without denying that time, in the meantime, has already driven everything—even my own perspective of matters—onward.”

to be continued.

Translated from the German