

Magic Realism: The Work of Carolyn Kallenborn

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You can learn a lot about a person by asking what she reads. Carolyn Kallenborn prefers the genre of literature described as magic realism—stories in which situations are real enough to be familiar, but completely extraordinary things occur. It's an issue of being both real and unreal at the same time—the impossible becomes possible and even ordinary. For her, this provides a shift out of her usual way of thinking and into a world more poetic than mundane. Magic realism is also an apt metaphor for the way in which she approaches materials and, by extension, her art.

Kallenborn came to fiber in the same way as many of us, by learning the basics of sewing from her grandmother and her mother. Throughout her youth she sewed her own clothes and held many jobs which helped her gain increasing skill in tailoring and design. She married, had a child, and worked at being a bridal designer and maker and then as a designers assistant for the Pleasant Company. She was also involved in theater and costume for Shakespearean dramas. It wasn't until she was nearly thirty that she decided to enter the University of Wisconsin at Madison . There she took her first surface design course and everything changed. While she was studying and working in fiber, she was taking elective courses in other studio areas, including metalworking.

She was also exposed to the exhibitions sponsored by the university, one of which left an enormous impression on her. The exhibition featured metal works, ostensibly garments similar to chain mail, delicately configured by the artist and utterly unlike armor.

Kallenborn's work is almost never just one thing. Rather, it is a complex of materials, each responding to the other. She states that it has always been materials that inspired her. That inspiration has expanded to encompass a fascination with process as well. She defines herself as a maker. When asked what draws her to certain materials, she responds that it's all about the touch. Metal is cold and hard and feels so very different from a piece of fabric, but metal can also be made flexible. Fabric is more fluid; it doesn't have an internally rigid structure. It is the juxtaposition of opposites which makes their association so compelling to her. Part of her goal is to see if she can get one to act like the other. Pewter appeals to her because it is a relatively soft metal. In one work, she manipulated the pewter by laying a sheet of it over her dress form and, in essence, embossing it to follow the flow of the body form.

She particularly enjoys working with materials when they are in a transformative state, such as when metal is extremely hot and is therefore pliable. She is drawn to those moments when one expects a material to be a certain way and, because of her actions, the material behaves outside of its characteristic or common manner.

It is worth noting here that she rarely, if ever, uses the term “fiber.” She always speaks of “fabric,” which strongly suggests her view of materials as a means, building components to be manipulated towards an end, and not simply a veneration of her material.

Kallenborn also expresses a fascination with “little bits of things.” She delights in making and assembling her pieces out of many component parts. This works very well with metal, particularly as she is fascinated with metal objects like chain mail or cultural artifacts such as purses from the 1920s and ‘30s made out of something very like chain mail. “They are almost like snakes, the way the material moves and breaks over your hand, it’s still heavy and weighty like metal, but it’s acting just like a very fluid piece of fabric...I am drawn to that idea of individuals. Each one is able to do some particular thing but when they start working in harmony, even when each retains its own personality, they can make something that’s much more complex and much more interesting.”

The way a piece acts in space, reacting to air currents and random movement, is interesting to Kallenborn and therefore she almost completely rejects wall pieces. Her background as a seamstress inevitably leads her to do some work on and for the body, although she doesn’t necessarily describe these works as costume. She tends, rather, to think of the body as an armature, which activates the work through movement. She believes that donning a garment is a transformative act, changing the way a person moves and movement activates the work. This is particularly important in the metal pieces, because of the potential for sound, as she wishes her work to engage as many of the senses as possible.

Kallenborn thinks of herself as a sculptor, but states that she feels she’s always on the edge, caught between surface and form. If she’s working a pattern on fabric or metal, she’s always thinking about what it will do three-dimensionally, and the same is true when she’s working three-dimensionally—she is considering what she must do to the surface. When asked if she could ever conceive of working with material which remained untreated, her response, is “Not without doing something to the surface. I would scratch it, burn it, take a torch to it. I’d bend it or hammer it...and maybe that’s part of it—you’re changing the character of that material. The more it shifts from where it was, to something totally different, the more fascinating it is to me. It’s like a conversation.” Thus Kallenborn’s work is about transformation. The

changes do not have to be large or even very obvious. In this alchemy all that is required is a subtle shift, an elusive redefinition. The words “flow” and “fluid” come up in her conversation repeatedly and seem to allude not only to the flexible nature of her materials but also to her desire to achieve that shift.

It's anyone's guess which material will attract Kallenborn's attention next. She has mentioned an interest in glass, although it is difficult for her to imagine how she would incorporate that into her work right now, lacking the appropriate glass facilities. She has worked with Plexiglass, however, a material which can be more easily manipulated in her own studio.

Kallenborn's work is sensuous and exploratory. It's about opposites reacting to one another, mimicking each other, responding to touch and making sound. The appeal resides in a combination of seemingly dissimilar materials which become compatible through Kallenborn's actions. In a sense, those opposites become conspirators, visually expressing her taste in literature.

~Michele Fricke is a weaver and Professor of Art History at the Kansas City Art Institute.