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Karen Dow: Suspended by Process

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For 30 years, Artspace has championed the ideas and artistic concerns of local artists and created space for exhibitions on the most urgent issues of our time. These topics have spanned the AIDS Crisis (*Interrupted Lives*, in 1991), Immigration (*Mythical Nation*, 2003), Globalization (*Factory Direct*, 2005), Climate Change (*Futurecast*, 2012), and in 2015, racial bias in the Justice system (*Arresting Patterns*). Over this period, Artspace has been at the forefront of New Haven’s arts scene, taking risks on behalf of local artists to advance their careers.

From 2016 to 2017, Artspace will present a series of exhibitions and anniversary events under the banner *Three Decades of Change* that celebrate the artists who founded Artspace and shaped our organization in its pivotal moments. We present *Suspended by Process* to honor and witness anew the collaborative impulse of Karen Dow, who founded our Flatfile Collection in 2000. By virtue of her visionary leadership, the Flatfile has grown to include over 1,200 works by 150 regional artists.



Suspended by Process is generously sponsored by





Community of Forms: The Prints of Karen Dow

Nova Benway

As I write this, Karen Dow has transformed the Artspace gallery into a studio: carting a small Griffin press into the gallery and inviting visitors to produce a set of one hundred monoprints, she has neatly and abruptly erased the boundary between workspace and exhibition space. For the month of March, artists, friends and community members have filtered in and out, trying their hand at printmaking, in many cases for the first time. Karen, too, has allowed her identity to shift—always an artist and teacher, she is now a studio assistant and guide. The final exhibition will include prints, in black, of the shapes available to her visitors; a wall of her own prints, made with shapes from this template; and a large grid of the one hundred contributed prints by visitors to the gallery.

Karen's template is an alphabet of forms. Like the English alphabet, there are twenty-six of them, many seeming, perhaps appropriately, vaguely utilitarian: they recall brackets, Allen wrenches, or anvils, as well as architecture—columns, bridges, floor plans. Some have the mute expressiveness of shadow puppets. They feel like pieces of something, tools, rather than gestures or traces of motion. Karen offers these to her visitors as the building blocks of a new language. Like all alphabets, they contain no preordained meanings, but they do offer a certain sensibility—we express ourselves differently in different languages, after all. The significance of Dow's forms perhaps lies in their structural, but emphatically non-pictorial, quality: while she often talks about "building an armature" through her work, she exhorts her viewers to feel the finished pieces rather than analyzing them. What has always been an intuitive process for the artist is intended to be experienced similarly by the viewer.

The exhibition proves that the sparsest set of rules can sometimes reveal the most nuanced result. As each participant layers Dow's shapes, they tidy up the border of each one with a Q-tip, tracing the edge of each form. This simple action has

produced an amazingly diverse range of subtle effects, as each person's gesture is revealed as sharp or loose, tentative or assertive. (There are only twenty-six letters in the English alphabet, but we speak each one with a different accent.) The finished prints in *Suspended by Process* depict states of pleasurable irresolution: they are softly jagged puzzle pieces, signs pointing in conflicting directions, ghosted silhouettes of themselves. They reinforce Dow's long-held view that geometric abstraction is not opposed to the intuitive or the personal.

By the time you read this, Artspace will—mostly—have been restored its former identity, displaying work rather than process. But traces of collaborative making will remain, not least in Karen's own work. It is perhaps surprising how much this group project has to say about the individual artist's process. Karen has described her work as a community of forms: she regards each shape in relation to the others. One might offer tender support for its neighbor, while another jostles for space. Some might recede while others jump forward. But Dow's work is not a democracy, and her intention is not complacent equilibrium: she doesn't insist that each form be given equal attention, and some are meek while others are bullies. She works fluidly with each element of the composition, more interested in the expressive personality of each piece than in an overarching, predetermined plan.

In *Suspended by Process*, this notion of interdependence transforms from a compositional metaphor to a cumulative procedure. If Karen has long been an intuitive composer of images, one could now say she is a composer of intuitions. She views all one hundred images as a single work, like the pages of a book. She has thus initiated a composition made up of dozens of individuals' contributions, and no one—including Karen herself—can say what the final result will be. Karen points out that it's often hard to get perspective on your work until you can see it through another's eyes; it's not until you stand in front of the work with another viewer that you can be sure it has any life in it. Like many artists, she often finds herself wondering whether all this time in the studio, this strange devotion to form and color, is meaningful or even interesting. *Suspended by Process* has invited her audience to share this sense of uncertainty, of vulnerability—and to confirm that it is, indeed, meaningful. Karen's prints and paintings appear carefully

orchestrated, but are in fact the result of careful attention to her personal intuition. The exhibition mirrors this interior process as a social interaction with her collaborators.

The work is joyful. This is important to note, since abstraction has at times been slandered as austere, self-serious. Karen changes the color palette each day—always four colors—and their interplay is light-hearted and enticing to the eye: orange, green, yellow, black, brown, lavender. She wants a process that draws people in, that makes them feel welcome. Karen recently described to me two children, nine or ten years old, who came into Artspace with their parents and were drawn immediately to the press. "Can I make another one?" is the feeling Karen is after. She seems to feel it more and more in her own work: "I can print for hours; sometimes I forget to eat," she tells me. The fluidity of printmaking—the ease with which one can change one's mind and start over—is satisfying in a way that painting cannot approach. "I now feel like a printmaker who paints," says, sounding a bit surprised at herself. She is imagining another iteration of the project; this time, she would work with people one on one, to encourage a more complex engagement with the process. Karen has described printmaking as "an out of body experience," and it's strange to realize that what *Suspended by Process* offers its visitors is a chance to experience this for themselves. In a time when art—especially abstraction—is too often understood as an esoteric activity beyond the average person's capacity to understand, Karen has invited her audience to participate in something both deeply personal and profoundly universal. "Shared joy," she calls it.

Nova Benway is a curator at The Drawing Center in New York, where, with artist Lisa Sigal, Benway directs Open Sessions, a two-year program of experimental exhibitions and public programs co-organized with thirty-six local, national and international artists. Open Sessions incubates new ideas about drawing, providing a rare, extended opportunity for artists to work together in creating their own context around the medium. Benway is a frequent contributor to books on artists' work; her essays have been translated into numerous languages.