

in conversation

This email interview was held between Karin Daymond and Mandy Conidaris in September 2014

MC - Karin, as well as asking you about a few of the recent monotypes and the paintings from the exhibition *Welcome Stranger*, in this interview I'd like to refer to some previous prints made with Mark Attwood at The Artists Press with a view to discussing aspects of your creative journey. My information for these has been drawn from the writings about you and the works from Mark's website

<http://www.artprintsa.com/karin-daymond-landscape-prints.html>

You have lived in Mpumalanga for over twenty years now. How long for you has the land been a source of inspiration, a significant subject for creative exploration?

KD - The land has crept into my work since I moved to Mpumalanga. As a student (UKZN, Pietermaritzburg) and for a few years after, my work was largely what I would call introvert, still life and interiors, but Mpumalanga in the early nineties wasn't a place that nurtured navel-gazing and angst. It was sink or swim, I needed a shift in focus and there was this amazing, slightly foreign landscape just outside my door. Also, it was the first time I had lived in an environment where many people make their living from the land.

MC - As well as in your home base of Mpumalanga, you have painted images of the land in places like St Lucia, the Free State and the Karoo. On a general level, do you come across landscape sites while travelling? Or do you specifically go to a place intending to make artwork there, and if so, what would most likely inform that choice?

KD - I tend to stumble upon places that generate energy in my work. I have never consciously been to a place with art-making in mind, but of course, once I am in an environment I am like a sponge. The Free State was a surprise to me as I went on a whim with my partner, for something related to his agricultural work and found a place that was grappling with its sense of belonging. Signs of that struggle were so vividly marked on the land in the form of fences, settlements, graves, paths... Karoo is known as big-sky country, but instead I was blown away by the vegetation, the struggle for survival that creates the patterns and textures. Today, I happen to be in Cape Town. Driving past Camps Bay, I saw the kelp shifting in the gentle waves and thought I saw refugees floating in the Mediterranean and waving for help. That's because my head is full of what I am working on right now.

MC - Your work is about so much more than just reproducing 'the landscape', it holds the land as metaphor – for example, despite portraying a landscape with no actual human form, you suggested the past presence of people in your 2010 suite of lithos *Remnants on*

***the Land*. Here your placement of stones suggest humankind having manipulated the stones and rocks to create somewhere for themselves to live, to mark spiritual spaces, and as cairns or final resting places. Yet now natural elements in the land are beginning to reclaim themselves. About these works, you have said that “when humans have annihilated themselves the earth will endure and remain”. In his book *Quantum Theology*, Diarmuid O’Murchu says a similar thing, that the earth “is not purposefully antihuman, but as long as we continue to change the global environment against its preferences, we encourage our replacement with a more environmentally benevolent species”. Your work is not overtly environmental, but is this a consideration or a subtheme? Would you comment on these statements in relation to your work?**

KD - Environmental issues crept into my work under the cover of ‘the landscape’. I remember very early landscapes when I first focused on how farming eroded the natural landscape (*Itala Ghosts* comes to mind, now a proclaimed nature reserve, but with clear scars on the land from past farming). It has become common knowledge that everything we do impacts on our environment, on a human scale as well as on a global scale. Even my ‘simple’ landscapes (the *Landscape Alone* series of drawings comes to mind) are environmental statements because they have the feeling of documentation of a pristine environment. We all know that the space where we can be completely alone is becoming, on many levels, a rare thing. Probably my most overtly ‘environmental’ work is *At Our Peak*, a painting of a deliberately precarious pile of rocks that could topple at any moment. This pile of rocks serves no real purpose, and yet a lot of energy was required to make it. The fires are burning in the background to add to the feeling of reaching the end of a process.

MC - In your 2013 suite of lithos – the *Karoo works (2013)* – there is no sense of human presence, either past or present. You commented that the work is purely about the land and how it gave you pause to think. Although seemingly empty, we realise that the land as such is never empty, just that from the self-absorbed perspective of much of humankind it is considered empty without tangible – and the case of an artwork, visible - evidence of our presence. Would you say that this meditative experience you had of the land when making these works was a necessary stage in your conceptual shifting? That is, from looking at evidence of a more settled though earlier human presence in *Remnants on the Land* to considering the strength inherent in an essentially unchanging natural landscape as witness to the transitory quality of human presence, as either inhabitants or refugees?

KD - This suite of lithographs followed the *Landscape Alone* series of drawings I referred to. I was drawn to the idea of being alone and consequently without the trappings that tend to shield us from realizing how little control we really have. I likened it to that game children play when they attempt to think about nothing, but realize that it is impossible. Naturally, this leads to meditation in adults and I was looking for this in these drawings and lithos. I found it fascinating how tenuous this sense of being alone without human interference was.

One tiny shift in the spacing of the clumps of grass and the human eye will read it as a path. Truthfully, all art is about the artist, how we fit into our space. So, yes, the 'alone' landscapes are an important part of my conceptual shifting. I thought when I started making them that they would be a kind of rest, but they wrestled their way into my thinking. We really aren't as important or as strong as we imagine we are...

MC - Your new painting *Transient*, using landscape and cloth in a formally more conventional way, to me suggests looking out through curtaining, of being in a safe place while looking out as what seems to be a vast and inhospitable land. Yet again, we know how tenuous is the notion of home. Understanding that we bring our own life experiences with us when engaging with artwork, what would be your response to my associations with that work.

KD - I am glad that you have asked this question! I have been fascinated by responses to this painting. On the one extreme is the viewer who feels they are sitting in a safari lodge, looking out over a pristine environment (while the curtains flutter gently in the breeze) and feeling comforted by how little human interference is visible. On the other extreme is the view that these cloths belong to women on a daunting journey, resting before they cross this inhospitable land. I was very deliberate with my choices; the cloths are placed like stage curtains, to create the feeling that something important is about to happen. The cloths are mismatched, so they aren't really curtains. The landscape is the Kruger National Park, close to my home. It is a place that I revere for its pristine quietness, but can also see as a frightening and inhospitable, depending on what experience one brings to it.

MC - The work you created for *Welcome Stranger* also deals with the notion of traces of presence, although here the presence specifically refers to refugees. As we know, throughout history refugees have been created through human violence, whether political or cultural, and is a universal state. But your work is not about the causes for the movement of refugees, but about their silent and fearful migration, their attempts to remain alive yet unobserved. Your discovery of their clothes, shoes and bags while you were on a beach in Sicily speaks of the poignancy inherent in simple everyday possessions. Could you describe how this finding affected you, and how it shifted your approach to the landscape of your home?

KD - I sometimes refer to my life as before and after the refugees. Now, I have a heightened awareness of what the Kruger Park would feel like to a refugee passing through on foot, as thousands have done. Or what a dust road in the Karoo would look like if I didn't have a cosy bungalow to return to (*Tomorrow*). Home and shelter is such a profound need in all of us. To be without it is for many, unimaginable. This makes it easy to distance ourselves from displaced people. These neatly folded clothes didn't allow me to distance myself. The desperation that causes people to be unable to stay where they belong, was all there in those folded clothes.

MC - You speak of African cloths such as the kind you have painted into the landscape as offering protection, yet also showing the women refugees' attempt to hold onto their senses of identity through colour and beauty. Three of your works *Sicily I, Sicily* and *Whisper* have an awareness of these cloths – fabric by its very nature being as biodegradable as human presence and identity – as having become integrated into the land, almost as fossils. Would you say that the fragility of cloth and the knowledge underpinning fossil formation speaks of an impression that the existence of the human race is temporary on the Earth?

KD - I was thinking on a smaller scale in these works. Yes, as a race we are probably temporary, but the cloth is meant as a reference to the fragility and the tenacity of the existence of a refugee. This year, roughly 120 000 people have been rescued from the Mediterranean by Italian ships. We can talk endlessly about the reasons for the existence of refugees, but it is only when we realise that these are individuals (someone with a size 6 shoe, who likes the colour orange or pink, for example) that we will start to feel the problem. It is truly tragic that in some cases, the fabric (clothes, shoes) was less easily lost than the human lives.

MC - Could you speak a little about other works, such as *Marikana, The Shore* and again *Sicily I*, which seem to have a subterranean glow. Could you speak a little about that sense of underground light that you have created?

KD - I made *Marikana* before I went to Sicily, but have included it in the *Welcome Stranger* show because it is about the same issues of dispossession and betrayal. Most miners are migrants and I am sure they would rather be home, where they couldn't stay. I was intrigued by media images of the striking miners sitting on the rocky outcrops. The solid, ancient rock contrasted starkly with the transient presence of the miners, yet their steadfastness was echoed in the rock. This particular *koppie* is close to my home and it burns every year. It always has a primal feeling for me. I like your reference to a "subterranean glow". As I paint less directly from life my work seems to have less of a single light source and more of a general 'glow'. I would also like to think there is some echo of patterns and rhythms that occur in all things natural.

MC - Also a painting with that glow, and the only one that contains the human figure is *Stay A While*. Could you comment on your decision to include the figure in just this one work?

KD - My daughter modelled for this work, but really it is me. When I return from travelling, I pass through this valley and then I know I am close to home. This time, returning from Sicily and with the idea of migrancy in mind, I felt a strong sense of belonging. I think the figure was necessary to convey the weight of this awareness. She is stitched in to the landscape

with brushmarks and she is definitely not going anywhere. It is a bit as if she is lying in state, in her final resting place. So be it.

MC - And a discernible human presence is evident in the two monotypes *In the Shadows I* and *In the Shadows III* through your inclusion of shadows of figures?

KD - Yes, but these figures are far more fleeting than the figure in *Stay a While*. I used shadow to suggest impermanence and anonymity. Ironically, refugees depend on anonymity while they are on the move. When they reach the place where they are seeking asylum/refuge, they depend on being recognized by the authorities.

MC - Except for the above two prints, in some of the works the cloths appear to be floating, in some they appear integrated into the landscape, yet throughout a strange tension has developed as in each of these states there is a hint of the other?

KD - What you have described is synonymous with migrancy and with being a refugee. I can only imagine how those few possessions taken from home become like a life raft. Painting *Welcome Stranger* was an absorbing process. It took a long time and at times I thought I was being silly, devoting so much energy to these little pieces of floating cloth. By the end of the process, I felt a tiny glimmer of satisfaction because I had walked that fine line between permanent and fleeting, naïve and reality...

MC - Would you mind sharing your creative process when you arrive at a place you wish to paint – do you sketch/paint/photograph the land while there as well as work afterwards in your studio?

KD - Yes, all of the above. Most of my work involves a lot of studio time. If I work outdoors, it is usually in pen and ink, charcoal or pencil. I take photographs and sometimes rely on these for information (the growth pattern of a plant, the shape of a skyline) but find that now I work more from memory. The painting *Sicily* is painted entirely from memory and I think one can feel that. These days I find that seeing the landscape is only a tiny part of the process. It is as if my vocabulary has increased and I draw on things in me that I may not even know are there. The landscape is often the starting point, but as my body of work grows, I feel like a GPS with lots of blue-highlighted, previously travelled roads criss-crossing the map. They sometimes obscure the intended path but they can make a richer journey.

MC - Finally on another note, you have kindly agreed to allow outoftheCUBE to feature your exhibition online while it is showing at Glynis Blomkamp's Gallery 2 in Johannesburg with her agreement. At outoftheCUBE, we believe that online exhibitions can't replace a physical exhibition, but that each could add to and complement the other. Could you share a few of your thoughts about online exhibiting, the pros and cons?

KD - One of the delights of 2014 is our access to information. I revel in it. There is no way to replace standing in front of the original work (my work is sometimes big, so the reduction in scale is significant), but it is a privilege to be able to reach a larger audience via other media. It should indeed work both ways, so that more people are encouraged to go into galleries after seeing work on their screens. In a way, artists are going to need to work even harder to be heard. People in general are becoming spoiled with so many instant images available at a push of a button and we may forget what it takes to **create** a strong image. Seeing the work in any form is better than not seeing it at all (well, hopefully) and will extend the conversation, as we are doing in this interview!

Thank you Karin!