



Walking their own paths, Jane Abrams and Aaron Karp arrive together at artistic success

Creative Non-collaboration

Dressed in artist-black beside botanical paintings that writhe with color, Jane Abrams embodies the notion of “hidden in plain sight.” Her canvases spill blossoms, leaves, roots, and watery reflections in an intricate chaos that is as orchestrated as an Indian tapestry—and often as large. Her resume likewise runs several screens long with art awards, residencies, and solo exhibitions. Yet the modest painter waves off entire chapters from her 40-year art career so as to “make a long story short.” How to reconcile this runaway fecundity with an artist who gushes not at all?

It helps to know that Abrams is, by her own account, “fiercely and privately independent” and introverted by nature, the girl who hid under the dining room table in Wisconsin and drew on the underside. “I tend to be insular,” she admits. “I hide behind my adobe wall and do my work.”

Now that she has retired from 22 years of teaching art at the University of New Mexico, Abrams can retreat into her backyard studio in Albuquerque’s North Valley and shut the door. Yet, a few steps away behind a shared wall, fellow painter Aaron Karp labors on his own canvases in a partnership that has lasted 46 years but still elicits from Abrams a rueful sigh. Why couldn’t they keep their separate homes *and* separate studios, as in years past?

Alone, she fills her space with a crowd of passions: books, art supplies, half-carved blocks of wood, botanical paraphernalia, and posters and textiles in cryptic scripts. She spent a decade studying Ayurvedic herbalism, learned Sanskrit, and counts among her interests architecture, Spanish poetry, and Vedic chants, all of which are woven enigmatically into serpentine works. Her painted wood carvings wander in another direction, toward a lifelong fascination with alchemy and

scientific process.

It was science, in fact, that led to her first master's degree and to teaching school in Florida in the 1960s. It was only after her husband was killed in action in Vietnam that the young mother of two "pursued art things... and found out I was pretty good"—good enough to earn a spot in the printmaking program at the University of Indiana, where she eventually met Karp. Thus began the twisting trajectory of twin art careers that has taken them constantly apart, only to reunite.

The first separation came when she took a job at the University of New Mexico as its first full-time female professor of art. This was the early 1970s, when future friend Judy Chicago was at Tamarind Institute and universities were grappling with the rise of feminism and identity politics. Incensed by what she perceived as constant attacks and challenges from her male colleagues, Abrams developed a keen sense of the shared oppression of women artists. Once, she even wrote to Georgia O'Keeffe—and the famously severe painter wrote back, commanding the young art professor to visit at an appointed hour.

"I thought, you betcha," Abrams recalls. "I picked some daffodils and drove my truck up there" to Abiquiú. "It was a very interesting afternoon. I can't remember a thing we talked about, but what was interesting to me was how she 'did' her life—the things she kept around her that were beautiful and interesting, the specimens in *nichos*."

Now as established as O'Keeffe was then, and surrounded by the artifacts of a lifetime of beautiful interests, Abrams has made multiple revolutions since the brightly colored, technically accomplished, surrealistic intaglio prints that won her early notice. In the mid-1980s she became ill from exposure to the acids used in etching, and switched to painting so she could accept a Roswell Artist-in-Residence year.

Suddenly, she found, "I could do all these things I couldn't do with prints, like work large. It was such a relief to choreograph my movements to that scale." Producing vast expressionistic landscapes in deep, saturated colors was "the scariest thing I could think of," she says, but in those days, "the scarier the task, the hotter my engine ran."

Travels to Central America and Asia over the following decade inspired moody tableaux of mythical scenes set in jungles, volcanoes, lakes, and ruins, steeped in saturated color and intimations of politi-



cal terror, on the one hand, and spiritual legacy on the other—the fruits of a curious exploration that weaves through her iconography.

Abrams still likes to paint large, but her palette has softened, brightened, the landscapes shimmering with the reflections off ponds and rivers—which she maintains is still "political"—but absent any signs of civilization. Instead, plants waving, dancing, hiding, and exposing at dizzyingly close proximity make for the ultimate metaphor of her imagination, dense with private notations. "Often there is a blending of the forces," she says of her private passions. "They continuously ebb and flow throughout my work."

Step out of Abrams's studio door and turn left, and your first impression upon entering the studio of Aaron Karp is how utterly dissimilar it is. His space is as empty as hers is full. If she has feathered a Victorian nest, he has carved out a monk's cavern. "I like having space," he admits. "I have so much going on in my mind."

A native of New York, Karp struggled to find meaningful work

Aaron Karp, *Lodestar* (2012), acrylic on canvas. Opposite: Jane Abrams, *Indigo Pond* (2005–2006), oil on linen.



Jane Abrams and Aaron Karp in their studios. Opposite: *Swamp Juju* (2013), oil on linen, is part of a series Abrams created while she was in residence at the Everglades National Park; Karp created *Dry Doc* (2005), acrylic on canvas, by superimposing what he calls a “drunken grid.”

anywhere near Abrams once they graduated and she took the job at UNM to support her family. It was during one of their early periods apart, when Karp was managing a gallery in North Carolina in the late 1970s, that he took up painting after years away from making art, and suddenly found himself winning awards.

“I developed a fascination with tile, and used tape to deal with the grout lines,” he explains of the technique that kept him at canvas over the next four decades. Laying down masking tape in a grid over an abstract painting, he will repaint, pull the tape, retape, and paint again, in a system that now involves re-painting and re-taping some dozen times on a single painting.

“I work on systems in a grid, but they’re all different,” he says of the canvases propped around the studio that bear marks of an eye-popping effect, at once orderly containment and wild abstraction. There are small, static grids like Agnes Martin’s, snakelike swirls that recall the animism of Art Nouveau, and panoramas of orbs floating

in imaginary space that point to nothing so much as a screen saver colliding with a Magic Eye puzzle. Indeed, something about Karp’s work inspires critics to flights of verbosity, reflecting their surprise at a painter so grounded in modernist tradition and yet so original.

Curator Sandy Ballatore introduced one of Karp’s shows by referencing his “visual battle between an illusionistic space that contains solid-looking forms and shimmering surface pattern.” William Peterson in another monograph describes his “solidifying forms” that are “counteracted and further complicated by subtly kaleidoscopic shifts between adjacent planes and by the luminous and shimmering mosaic of tiny brushstrokes.”

Ever a step ahead of his interpreters, Karp has applied his technique to subjects traditional and experimental with equal aplomb. “Systems on top of systems” is how he explains it, “pushing the system to expand my vocabulary about how you see breaks in color or shape. It has a lot to do with spatial relationships, patterns that together make

a kind of noise or sound.”

Thanks to his early success in North Carolina, Karp was able to rejoin Abrams in 1979 as an assistant art professor at UNM. Soon after, he won the first of two Roswell Artist-in-Residence grants, which seeded the ground for his next big break in 1983, when he was invited to show at the Guggenheim Museum in the exhibit *New Perspectives in American Art*. This led to a long list of solo shows, awards, and residencies to match Abrams’s, so that after five years, he left UNM and started painting full time.

Both painters had been impressed in Roswell by the importance of having a work space separate from home. Karp remodeled his northeast Albuquerque home, then eventually moved into one of the two renovated adobes at Abrams’s place in exchange for building their two studios in back. Her children had grown and gone, but it was years before the couple moved into the same house so they could rent out the other; nor did they tell anyone when they finally married on a trip to Thailand in the late 1980s. Yet for all their separateness, what unites them has not changed.

“If I see something in her painting that doesn’t work, I’ll let her know,” Karp says, “and hopefully she does the same for me. We are eager to get that feedback, because who else do we have to see it before it’s done?”

“I think what he does is amazing—he works so fast,” Abrams says. “Our work is very different and we are very different, but we have a common language and can talk to each other in it.”

“People have written about the ‘Pollockesque’ surfaces we both have,” Karp says with a roll of the eyes—not keen to invoke that most unequal of modern art couples (although both Abrams and Karp, incidentally, have won Pollock-Krasner Foundation Awards). The fact that the two met as printmakers, both taught at UNM, and ended up known for colorful paintings crowded with intricate detail has made it irresistible for writers to speculate about hybridization.

Galleries that represent them both know better, steering clear of any such double vision. “I suppose the only overlap would be that they’re both career artists and keep schedules that are like a nine-to-five job,” says William Havu, of Havu Gallery in Denver. Both artists are represented by New Concept Gallery of Santa Fe. Indeed, what is most remarkable about the couple is the shared intensity of their discipline, and how they’ve managed to walk such strenuous paths to success. “I don’t know any other art couples who have actually made it work,” said Kim Arthun, who founded the gallery Exhibit 208 in Albuquerque and has known them since the 1970s.

Havu, reflecting on their shared monasticism, says, “This is what they do—this is their life, and they’re married to their studios.” *

