



Material Girl

Karin Olah makes the cut with fabric and fresh inspiration

Four years after *Charleston* magazine gave her an “Under the Radar Emerging Artist” award for creative, interesting, and still undiscovered art, mixed-media artist Karin Olah has become a fixture on the local art scene. Her fluid, colorful quilts-on-canvas are now hanging in homes and galleries across the country and have appeared in magazines such as *American Contemporary Artist* and *Art Business News*. She’s also earned nod after nod for shows at Piccolo Spoleto, Eva Carter Gallery, Robert Lange Studios, and City Gallery at Waterfront Park. Peek into her fabric-filled studio at Redux Con-



The artist uses rice starch to “paste” fabric pieces in up to seven layers, then embellishes with gouache and acrylic.



Skinny Dip in the Clouds, mixed media on linen, 36" x 30"



Unusual Blossom 19, fabric, gouache, and graphite on paper, 6" x 6"

“Everything I had learned from fabric, fashion design, quilting, and embellishment suddenly came together.” —Karin Olah

temporary Art Center, and it’s easy to see how her success today reflects the colors of her past.

The Pennsylvania native’s work is a patchwork of her childhood enchantment with the pure tones and perfect geometry of Amish quilts and her background in fine art. After graduating from the Maryland Institute College of Art, she was hired by a fabric design company in New York City, where she used her knowledge of fiber arts to design textiles for Donna Karen, Ralph Lauren, and Marc Jacobs. “Living in New York, I had no time or space to create my own art,” says Olah, “so I spent

my evenings freestyle quilting. I didn’t have patterns; I just stitched designs out of my head.”

Amidst the big city noise, Olah found serenity in her craft-making roots. And by 2003, she was ready to pack up for someplace with fresh air and blue sky. Having heard about the vibrant, supportive art community in Charleston, she moved without hesitation and set up a makeshift studio in the back of a church. “I was doing a lot of quilting then, and I would prepare my designs by gluing fabric to cardboard,” Olah explains. “One day, I had this a-ha moment—I laid down my needle and started



Magnolia Family (detail), mixed media on linen, 12" x 12"



For her newest body of floral abstracts, Olah gleans inspiration from books on flowers and arrangements.

pasting all these ideas onto canvas. Everything I had learned from fabric, fashion design, quilting, and embellishment suddenly came together.”

Finally able to harness inspiration from the landscape, Olah discovered her creative process. After much experimenting, she found that using rice starch along with gouache and acrylic offered a perfect balance of stickiness and stiffness to layer her intricately cut pieces. She draws from the blocked colors of downtown maps, marsh grass movements, wrought iron curls, the symmetry of exotic blooms, and the calligraphy of shorelines, morphing them into abstract shapes that slowly come into focus.

“Karin’s ability to speak with a multitude of materials, along with the rhythmic way she applies each of them, creates an original voice,” says local artist and gallery owner Robert Lange, who has collected several Olah originals. “Her work is like dancing without anyone around. It represents colorful joy and freedom from our constraints.”

Though she’s now officially on the radar, Olah spent the summer touring off-the-map places. Before returning home, she completed a residency at the Echo Art School tucked in the Chatahoochee Mountains and then traveled to New York, Pennsylvania, and Colorado in search of the “fleeing, flowing, unwinding, and unraveling” shapes that have her and the Charleston art world transfixed. —*Kristen Gehrman*

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