



An Interview with Kim Abeles

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Kim Abeles was interviewed by Susan Lizotte on December 6, 2013



Kim Abeles' installations and community projects cross disciplines and media to explore biography, geography and environment. She has exhibited in twenty-two countries, including large-scale installations in Vietnam, Thailand, Czech Republic, England, China and South Korea. She represented the U.S. for the Fotografie Biennale Rotterdam and Cultural Centre of Berchem in Antwerp. A mid-career survey of her work curated by Karen Moss for the Santa Monica Museum, Kim Abeles: Encyclopedia Persona A-Z, toured the United States and South America. The Fellows of Contemporary Art sponsored the exhibition, and

the South American tour was presented by the United States Information Agency. Abeles received the 2013 Fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Her work is in public collections including the Museum of Modern Art Library Collection, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Berkeley Art Museum; Sandwell Community History and Archives, UK; and the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, Richmond, Virginia. Abeles' journals, artists books and process documents are archived at the Center for Art + Environment, Nevada Museum of Art.

What attracted you to the arts? What were your earliest experiences of making art? When did you know that you were an artist?

I really think in pictures, and my curiosity about people and the world is still insatiable. So artmaking has always been a way to process ideas through visual problem-solving. The range of topics that I started discussing in my work beginning in the late 70s was a matter of happenstance – where I lived, who I heard, or life lessons catching up with me. The interconnections of those topics became more clear as time went on.



As a young kid I would make elaborate felt boards in my bedroom to explain a subject (to myself). I made books about angels and devils as a child, carved a pair of clogs out of 4x4 wood in middle school, and in high school notes to my parents were typically written as rhymed poems. I always drew and painted and tried things I couldn't do. I am still more intrigued by effort and process than with outcome. Failure requires bravery.

Kim Abeles, Presidential Commemorative Smog Plates, 1992, 10.5" diameter each

Reagan Presidential plate created with smog (particulate matter) on porcelain plate; from the series, The Smog Collectors.

Photo credit: Ken Marchionno

Can you describe how you felt when you had your first exhibition?

By the time the work is on the walls, even now, it seems like something distant from myself as a person. I get so wrapped up in the process of it all that the outcome always feels a bit out of sorts. My enthusiasm is always in the moment, and my appreciation for the art itself is slow to arrive.

Could you talk about a significant success? Or a noteworthy failure that was an important turning point in your career?

I think the Smog Collector work has been my most successful work in terms of exposure and influence. I'd like to think that all my content-driven artwork is successful within the audiences and contexts that it addresses, but I know the innovation of the smog paintings — the process of putting stencils on objects and surfaces then placing them on rooftops to collect the particulate matter in the smoggy air — has been an effective artistic discussion about air pollution. I created the first Smog Collector in 1985, and still create them (amid new, and sometimes related projects). The Presidential Commemorative Smog Plates were on exhibit somewhere in the world from 1992 until last year! Most recently, I created an installation for the Museum of Arts and Design in New York; it is a dinner for two created in smog onto porcelain dinnerware and the linen tablecloth.

It is amazing how completely detailed and beautiful it is!



Kim Abeles, Dinner for Two in One Month of Smog, 2012. 38" x 49" x 28"
Smog (particulate matter) on porcelain dinnerware and linen Installation at Museum of Arts and Design, New York.
Photo credit: Ed Watkins



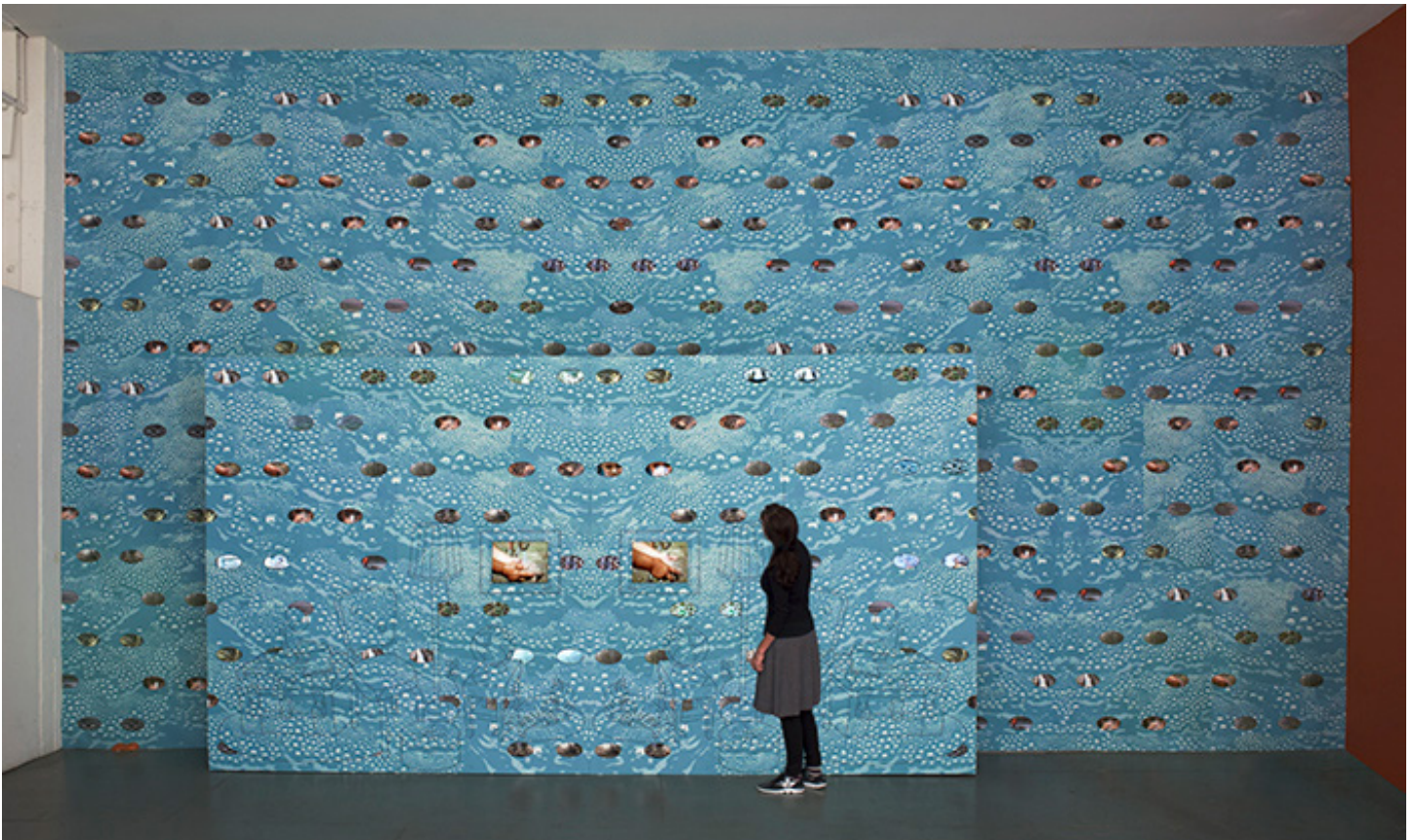
Detail of Dinner for Two in One Month of Smog,
Photo credit: Ed Watkins

I often wrote to scholars and professionals in other fields about the subjects of my artworks (beginning in 1979), but the Smog Collectors really opened up the boundary of art's previously self-imposed limitations. My artworks were suddenly able to survive in circumstances with institutions like the Bureau of Automotive Repair, or I could create the Environmental Activity Book for kids, or science centers and natural history museums or vehicle emissions testing waiting rooms could be venues for the work. It helped me to see that all artworks have spaces where they can live more closely with the world at large.

Oh, the second part of the question? Failure is always a good thing, once you get past the knock to the ego.

I totally understand that.

I have this image I rely on when I fail: I get punched in the face by someone with very large boxing gloves, and I'm on the ground and my nose is broken and bleeding all over the place. I'm on my back and I slowly shake my head to get my senses back, and I lift up a bit with my forearms, and then I stand up. That's it.



Kim Abeles, Women and Water (1 minute = 6 hours), 2012, 16" x 27" video wall

Can you describe your rituals or routines in your studio—daily vs. sporadic, music, etc.?

Straightening a table and putting away art supplies, and wiping the work area go a long way to re-center and get ready to work. I work every day and it's an odd day if I work less than 12 hours. I still enjoy all-nighters when necessary. Agnes Martin has a great quote about artmaking: "Drawing when you don't feel like it is called discipline."

What a great quote! What inspires your work? How do you generate new ideas, do you begin with a concept?

The concepts and metaphors come out of the art processes and research. I become the subject and eventually an inspired moment appears. It's spiritual and magical and a person would never mistake it for anything else.

Recently I had a three-week, turn-around deadline for an unexpected commission. The way that those 21 days were compressed really gave me a bird's eye view into my process. The challenge is to be patient about the arrival time of the idea. The only way to go "look" for an idea is not to look for it, but rather, to wrap every breath with the subject. I read about it, watched films (old, new, fiction and non-fiction), made notes and listened to single words that popped up; I sketched without the pressure of outcome, kept track of historical quotations, looked at all the images that google poured out, and thought back to my own personal experiences about the subject.

Then there is a point when all the thinking and feeling in the world can't replace physically moving materials and tools in order to try something sketched or conjured. And that physical moment is really when the idea hatches. (Hatched, but requiring the fabrication of the art object: all the skill, the cutting, the gluing, the painting, the sanding...)



Kim Abeles, Paper Person, 2009, 5' x 40' x 48.'
Sculpture made from paper trash that was generated by visitors to the CSC on Earth Day.
Permanent installation at the Ecosystems wing of the California Science Center, Los Angeles. Photo credit: Ken Marchionno

Can you describe what you are working on now?

One project has been in the works since autumn of 2011 and is now in fabrication phase. Walk a mile in my shoes is a permanent artwork for re-invention of two traffic medians in Los Angeles (on Rodeo Road and Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd, and Rodeo Road and Jefferson Blvd). The Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the Bureau of Engineering commissioned me to create a permanent art installation for two gateways to communities for pedestrians and commuters along the Rodeo Road axis. I found out about Xernona Clayton's incredible collection of shoes belonging to the Civil Rights marchers, and went to Atlanta to photograph them. My husband, Ken Marchionno, is a professional photographer who assists with my projects sometimes, and in LA we are photographing the shoes of local activists. The installation will include image tiles of the shoe photographs, short bios of each person, and larger sculptural elements that are centered around the ideas of empathy, activism and community.



Kim Abeles, Waiting Watching, 2012, , 8' x 16'

Video monitors and photographs embedded in mural-size images of lichens

Presented by Ecoarts Connections and the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History. Photo credit: Casey Cass

With which artists would you most like to trade art?

For many years, I've traded art and can sometimes buy art. I traded a collector one of my artworks for an Ed Keinholtz watercolor, so I know the joy of seeing an artwork on ones own. Hmmm. I would want something that belonged to Gertrude Stein.

Do you have any advice for future or emerging artists?

Try to remember the real reasons you make art, and that would only be answered on your own.

I have just one last question for you, if it were possible to extract all of the garbage polluting the Pacific Ocean Gyre and use it to create something, what would you consider doing with such a project?

The Pacific Ocean Gyre provokes thoughts of practical solutions rather than decorative ones. So, rather than making it into wallets, or sculptures, I would imagine harnessing it in order to create a sustainable island, a floating island complete with vegetation and wildlife. The other thought is to divide it among the corporate polluters, and return it to them.

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