

An Interview with Kelly Berg

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Kelly Berg was interviewed by Susan Lizotte. February and March, 2014.



[Kelly Berg](#) was born in Concord, Massachusetts and grew up just outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota where she began drawing and painting at an early age. Later on she returned to the East Coast where she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design. Being currently based in Los Angeles since 2009, Kelly has been creating and exhibiting her work locally including her two solo shows “Amazonia” and “Subterranean” at Frank Pictures Gallery in Bergamot Station. Her work has most recently been exhibited in group shows at [The Barrick Museum](#) (NV), [Walter Maciel Gallery](#) (CA), [Leslie Sacks Fine Art](#) (CA), Gallery 825 (CA), and the Carnegie Art Museum (CA). Kelly also was selected to participate in the Simply Perfect Art Project, an artist residency at the famous Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood in 2011.

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

I think even as a four year old I knew I was an artist. I always felt very different from everyone else during my childhood, but artwork was definitely what I excelled in and it also gave me an escape from the reality that I didn’t fit in. The first artworks I ever made were in the form of dinner plates, books, and dioramas. When I was really young, my mom had gotten me and my older siblings this kit where you color with special markers on a round piece of paper that you then send out to a company and they make a dinner plate out of it. I was two years old when I made my first one, and I remember loving markers. I couldn’t get enough of drawing with markers, and was very anti-crayon as opposed to the other kids in my preschool. Markers had this great immediacy to them and boldness, and since I began making art with them, I think the medium really affected how I developed my art skills early on.

Besides my earliest artworks being preserved in my family’s dinner plates, my other first artworks were in the form of books that I made myself. My mom would bring me home these pads of note paper from her job, and I would keep a certain amount of the pages stuck together and made what I called “books”. They were my own narratives, and usually just drawings to tell stories and only a few words as I was just learning how to write. The books again I made with markers and usually were stories I made up about dinosaurs, whales, insects or some other animal species I liked at the time. Not long after that, I branched out to 3-dimensions with similar subject matter. Being quite the nature enthusiast, my parents always made sure to take me to natural history and science museums, which is where I first saw dioramas. These had a huge effect on me and my early art projects, as I was completely fascinated by them. I started creating my own large “set-ups” using papier-mâché to sculpt entire landscape environments for my collection of model dinosaurs. I also made my own dioramas out of cardboard boxes and even miniature ones out of the kind of yogurt containers that came with clear plastic tops, which I used to represent the glass, and with paper cut-outs of landscapes inside. I saw a larger opportunity for my dioramas on our first family trip to South Dakota where we visited the Badlands National Park. I loved the jagged formations and layers of rock there, and still to this day it remains one of my favorite landscapes. About the time of that trip I

began taking my first photographs, and I set my dinosaur models up in different configurations on rocks in the Badlands, using the actual landscape to create diorama-like images. I think these early experiences of making art with a narrative carried through to even my work today where there is often a narrative element in my paintings.



Kelly Berg photographed in her studio by Alan Shaffer, 2014.

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

I generally work in my studio in the afternoon and evenings on a regular schedule, sometimes working into the late night, which is a time I really enjoy. I always work to music, and have since I was a child. Music has long been intertwined with my art practice as it sets the mood I want to convey through my paintings. The rhythmic qualities of music translate into rhythmic imagery such as patterns and shapes that I use in my paintings. Music has always been really important to me as an artist, as I was introduced to a lot at an early age such as David Bowie and The Doors through my father and older brother Michael who is a musician himself. Early on these musicians and others were some of my biggest inspirations and influences on me and on my artwork. Later on during my years at RISD I began looking more to contemporary or historical artists as inspirations, but also continued to be influenced greatly by music.

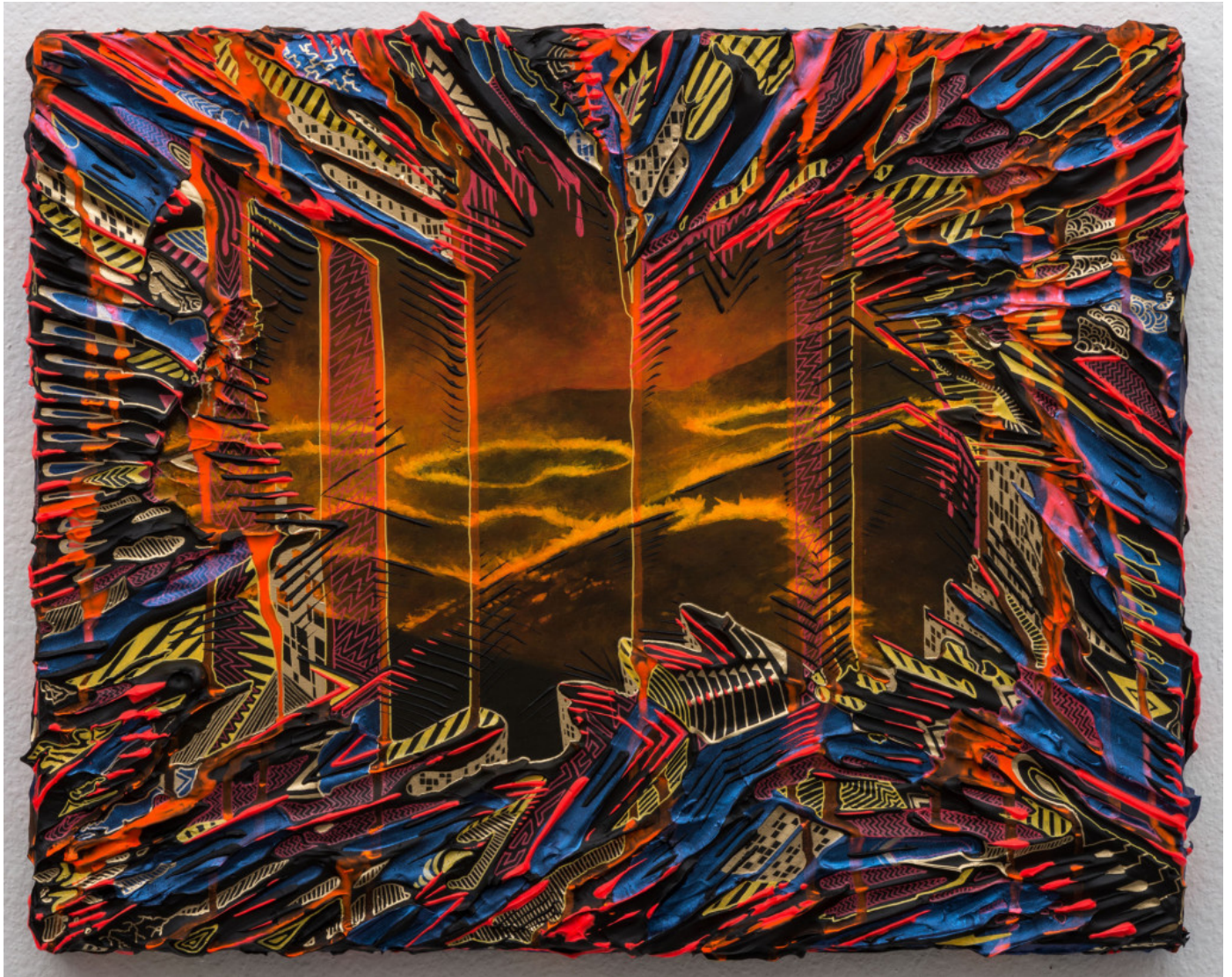


Kelly Berg, "Cryptodome", 30" x 40", Acrylic on canvas, 2013. Photo credit Alan Shaffer.

What inspires new work for you? How do you generate new ideas? Do you begin with a concept?

A new body of work for me usually begins after traveling. Since I was young, my family and I went on many trips, many of which we took in our RV so I've always spent a great deal of time on the road. For me, traveling has always given me new perspectives and posed new questions that I'd like to explore through creating my art. I think it's also that traveling gives you the space and distance to reflect back upon your life, or contemplate life in a more general sense. For me, the combination of movement of imagery and music has always been fruitful for generating new ideas. Sometimes the travel doesn't even have to be very far. I've come up with several of my new concepts for paintings when I'm driving and making observations, even if just around my Venice Neighborhood. In my recent series of natural disasters, I've also been watching the news and flipping through newspapers or online articles for inspiration since so many of my subject matters are currently being covered. Most of the time I begin my paintings with a concept I've been contemplating, but sometimes I don't and the concept reveals itself through my intuitive layering process. I always begin a piece with an overall mood in mind, where is where the listening to music part becomes vital. Since art is a visual experience, and experiences cause feelings, the feeling of each piece or the feeling it gives the viewer is a very important aspect of the piece to me.

I agree with you! It's fascinating how travel can provoke visual ideas and you begin to see something in an entirely different context.



Kelly Berg, "Inferno", 16" x 20", Acrylic and ink on canvas, 2013 Photo credit Alan Shaffer.

Can you describe what you are working on now?

Right now I am working with the theme of natural disasters and presenting them in a way that is beautiful and sublime while simultaneously ominous and posing questions about humanity's role in all of it. Recently I've also been trying to keep pushing the boundaries of paint and its physical 3-dimensionality through experimentation. I am interested in challenging the idea of a painting and its confines to the rectangle of a flat canvas, and also exploring the idea of the frame. I think a lot about the framing of natural history dioramas, and am interested in creating something like that in a more organic way. I want to create windows into other worlds or moments, which I'm realizing has really been a lifelong obsession for me.

I just want to say that I love the natural disaster paintings. They are haunting and beautiful.



Kelly Berg, "Vulcanalia", 9" x 12", Acrylic and ink on wood, 2013. Photo credit Alan Shaffer

What inspired your natural disaster series?

My natural disaster series came about due to a combination of recent and early influences. Ever since I moved to Los Angeles in 2009, natural disasters seemed very present in the media beginning with the wildfires of that summer. At night, my brother and I would walk outside of our house in Echo Park and look into the distance and there were lines of red and orange glowing in the not so distant hills like the fires of hell, it was very surreal. One of my recent paintings "El Diablo de Los Angeles" is inspired by this moment. Next was the Japanese earthquake and tsunami. At this point I had moved to Venice, and when there were rumors of the tsunami making it to the California coast I thought of those "tsunami safe zone" signs along Lincoln blvd. Watching the coverage of Japan on the news, the images were just hard from me to comprehend the reality of from a far. As more events began happening like hurricane Sandy, I began contemplating the images of natural disasters from the lens of an onlooker, whether through the TV screen or closer to home. There is something about the images that also reminded me of classic American landscape painting or British painters such as John Martin or J.M.W. Turner. I began thinking about the notion of the sublime being both beautiful and simultaneously terrifying, and creating a feeling of excitement in the viewer from this combination. It reminded me of my experience of huge severe thunderstorms coming through the Midwest. When the huge dramatic clouds rolled in with tons of lightning there was something both terrifying and exciting about it. You could feel dynamic nature. The darker side of that was when I was 12 years old having the reality of a near miss with a tornado. We had been on a family vacation

to Yellowstone in our big RV and were almost home when we ended up on the highway and caught in a horrific storm. A wall of rain came upon us and our RV shook and swayed, barely staying upright. Power-lines fell on top of our RV and we were saved by a knock on our door by a mysterious motorcycle man in a black rain jacket who pulled the power lines off of our vehicle so we could drive again. The image ahead was haunting, we drove past two semis overturned and a minivan with a huge tree that had fallen overtop and a path of debris. A tornado had missed us by a mere 100ft. After that I became the family storm "expert" and watched the weather channel practically for fun. I almost strayed from my art career to become a storm chaser, so nature's wrath has always been a major interest and perhaps an undercover obsession of mine.

My natural disaster series actually began though in 2013 shortly after a trip to the big island of Hawaii where I visited Volcanoes National Park for the first time. Seeing the caldera with a pool of molten lava and walking over the lava fields really reminded me of the power of nature and the potential for disaster. Within the Lava fields I was surprised at the sculptural forms and rainbow iridescence of the "fresher" areas and it made me want to create texture and 3-dimensional forms in my paintings. After much contemplation of what I had seen and felt there at Kilauea, my natural disaster series began.



Kelly Berg, "Pyroclastic", 8" x 10", Acrylic and ink and scratchboard technique on masonite, 2013 Photo credit Alan Shaffer

How do you see archeology and excavation informing the paintings?

Archeology and excavation refers to my inspirations, process, and how my work is experienced through the eyes of a viewer. I have always been interested in archeology and uncovering lost histories. I used to dig for fossils at my grandparents house in rural New Jersey through layers of shale, finding imprints of shells and ferns. My grandfather also used to take me to the Franklin Mine where the rare mineral Franklinite was discovered which glows neon rainbow colors when viewed under black light. We would gather rocks there and I'd bring home huge piles of the glowing minerals, and was completely fascinated by them. This fascination with uncovering evidence of other times and things from the earth later translated to an interest in archeology. In 2008 I had an experience that inspired me to bring archeology into my work. I traveled to Italy with a painting class I took at RISD where I saw renaissance paintings for the first time and even older sites such as the coliseum in Rome. That summer I spent a month in Athens, Greece and everyday went to see a different set of ruins with my sketchbook in hand. From multiple trips to the Acropolis to Delphi and island ruins on Aegina and Santorini, I saw so much ancient art and older evidence of human civilization than in Italy. Next I went to Cairo and saw the pyramids at Saqqara and Giza, which took me steps even further back in time to really the root of my interests in art history. These journeys seemed to take me further and further back in time and made me realize how deeply archeology had and would continue to influence me. It wasn't enough to paint about archeology after that experience, I then wanted to make work that was like archeology in that it took the viewer on a journey of uncovering layers and discovering many things within my paintings. When I began a new body of work in 2010 in Los Angeles, I made very layered paintings consisting of both abstract and narrative elements that created pathways through the compositions. In 2011 I took a trip to Naples and from there visited the site of Pompeii, which also had a huge effect on me. This was the moment where my interests in archeology and natural disasters first collided.

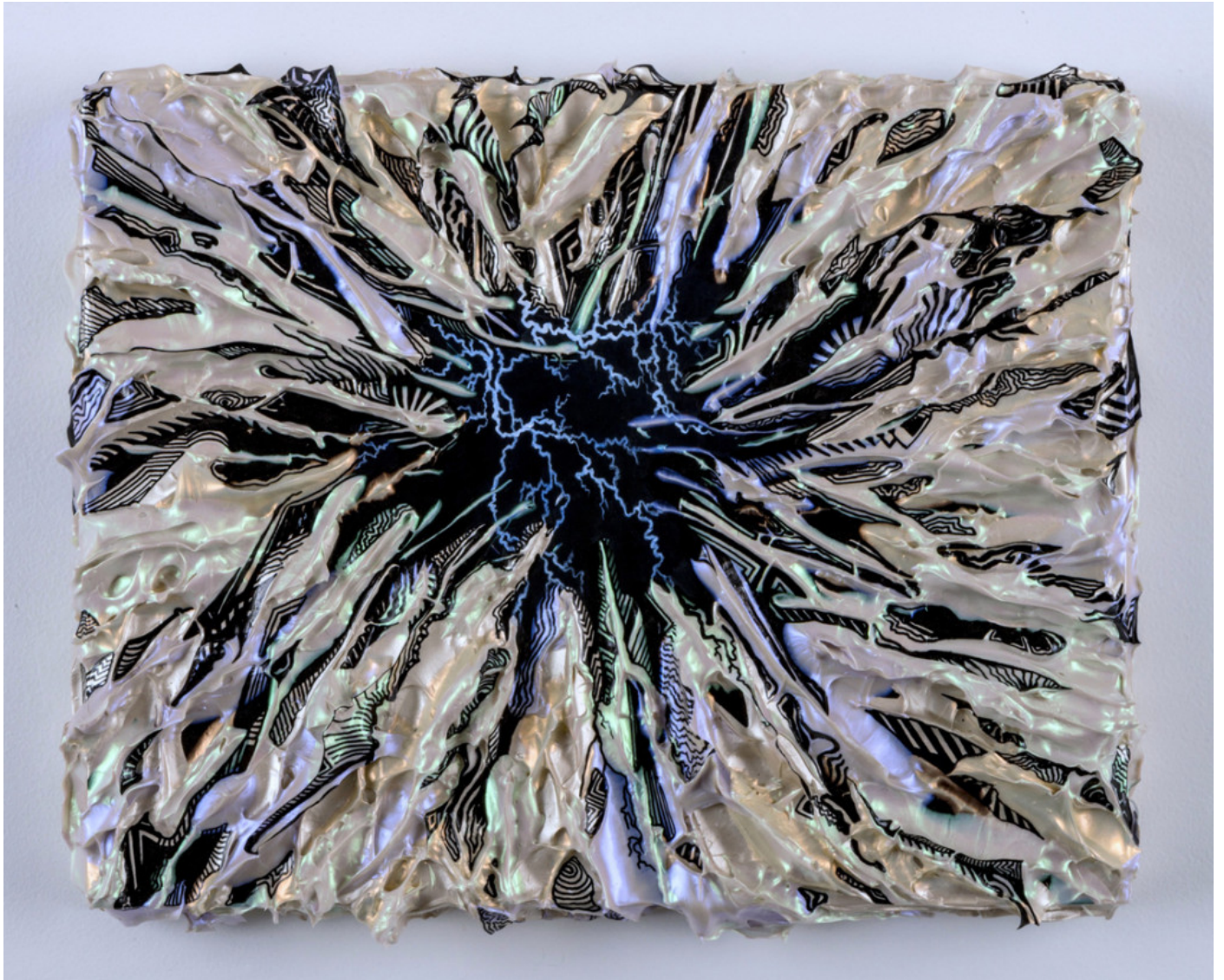


Kelly Berg, "El Diablo de Los Angeles", 30" x 40" , Acrylic and ink on canvas, 2013 Photo credit Alan Shaffer.

How do you feel that your time spent in Massachusetts, Minnesota and back east has informed your choice of color in your work? Does the light in California exert a different influence on your paintings?

I have always been attracted to vibrant and metallic colors since my childhood. The colors in the Minnesota and the east coast that I'd see on an everyday basis were pretty muted, especially in the wintertime. Some of the colors I experienced there out in nature made their way into my work however like the greens of dense vegetation and the grays of granite rock formations. I feel my environment never truly matched the artwork I wanted to make though until moving to Los Angeles. The vibrant colors both in nature and in the city of Los Angeles influenced my work to become more adventurous with color when I moved west. I think I always wanted to make work that used day-glow, metallics and overall bright colors and more contrasted schemes, and somehow when I moved to Los Angeles it seemed to make more sense and become more acceptable. There is a lot of color to be seen in everything in Los Angeles ranging from the succulent desert plants to neon lights, somehow seeing all of that made me feel completely free to experiment with color. I think to me the west and California has always represented freedom in general, whereas in Minnesota and on the East Coast there is a longer history and more traditions, which can feel confining. When I arrived in Los Angeles and saw what artists were making here, I saw a lot of interesting colors and textures in their work that I had never seen anywhere else. My introduction to California light and space and finish fetish artists opened my mind to a whole history of making art using the colors that I loved. I grew

up watching my dad, who is a pilot and engineer, work on his silver vintage corvette and building a whole RV-6 airplane in our basement workshop. I think this early experience of seeing all these interesting metallic surfaces relates to the light and space and finish-fetish artists being inspired by the car culture and infinite vistas of Los Angeles.



Kelly Berg, "Electrostatic", 11" x 14" , Acrylic and ink on wood, 2013 Photo credit Alan Shaffer



Kelly Berg studio, pictured with “Triple Threat” triptych, 48” x 108” (48” x 36” each canvas), Acrylic on canvas, 2013

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