

Painting on the edge with Debbi Kenote

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By Phin Jennings | 12 Jun 2023



"For me, painting is world building." Many storeys above Bed Stuy, Brooklyn, off a busy main road and above a sprawling storage facility, Debbi Kenote has invited me into the studio where she fashions her worlds out of wood, canvas, dye and acrylic paint. It is filled with interestingly-shaped paintings containing constellations of indeterminate forms, many of which find themselves cut off by their canvas' slanted edge or sharp corner. "Things peek in and out, enter and exit," she tells me, comparing the surface of a painting to the stage in a theatre show. "Things can feel too stiff if your viewfinder isn't capturing in a natural way."

CRISTIN TIERNEY



In Kenote's case, the viewfinder is almost never a regular shape. Almost all of her canvases – for which she builds the stretchers herself – contain inlets, joins, gaps, points and hinges. You can do a lot in terms of describing her work without even mentioning paint, which raises a question about exactly when paintings become interesting; at what point should the process of making, or talking about, a painting begin? Whether buying them off-the-shelf or building them themselves, most painters take their substrates – the surfaces they paint on – for granted, submitting to the four corners that enclose their images and focusing solely on what exists between them. Kenote sees the physical shape of the substrate as the first decision a painter makes, whether they know it or not. This attitude, she says, might have something to do with her MFA in sculpture: “with sculpture, the first question is what material you’re using, followed by what shape it will command in space. When I graduated and began thinking of painting again, I saw the support of a painting as a fertile place for play.”



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I recently spent some time with veteran figurative painter and curator Tim Hyman. He repeatedly told me that some of the most important things in a picture happen at the edges, and the best painters are those who focus on them. Not a painter myself, I can struggle to understand exactly what artists mean when talking shop about composition or materials. Often, I have to leave a technical idea like this to marinate in my brain until I see something that puts it into a context that I understand. Looking at Kenote's work, I can see the importance of edges. Her esoteric shapes mean that the forms she paints have more places to – as she puts it – peek in and out from; more edges mean more interplay between what is inside and outside of the painting, and more enclaves of blank space where the viewer is invited to extrapolate from what is in the picture to imagine what could exist outside of it.



And just like that, there is a world that exists not only within the painting but beyond it. “[As painters] we are creating magic,” she tells me, “and we want you to believe what we’re telling you.” The believability of Kenote’s work, what makes her worlds feel real, also has something to do with their edges. Like in our own minds, the images she makes are not presented as discrete things that begin and end in just the right place, but as vast and sprawling networks that refuse to fit neatly into their given space. There is a feeling that her subjects have not been doctored to make the perfect image, but are represented just as they are – an impressive feat for an abstract artist. Often, shapes fall off the canvas and reappear elsewhere, forms are cut off halfway through, just as our own ideas and memories tend not to arrange themselves neatly within our brains.