The Public Art of Joan Marie Kelly

Zones of Contact
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Oil Paintings 2008-2011

Essays by David Cohen and Joan Marie Kelly

This exhibition took place at Blue Mountain Gallery,
530 West 25th Street
New York, NY 10001, July 12-30 2011
Joan Marie Kelly is at the forefront of a new genre of painting: Social Painting.

Wait a minute, the reader says, if you mean social realism there is nothing new in that. It has been around since at least the 1930s when it was the dominant school in the United States. There were parallel movements in Europe, Mexico, and the USSR. Politically engaged artists would use the language of traditional realism to depict the lives and struggles of the common people.

Joan Marie Kelly would seem, at first glance, to fit right into this genre. Her painterly style is a realism we can immediately assimilate. Her subjects include migrant workers, sex workers, and people in contemporary, mundane interiors interacting with technology. “Eco Cyber Feminist” (2009), its quirky title inspired by a self-identification heard from a delegate at an academic conference, is a quintessential social moment painting, capturing a sense of who we are today in relation to the gadgetry we allow to define us.

Although she doesn’t come to her subjects armed with preconceived liberal or feminist ideas, many of her works confront prejudice, sexism and inequalities as she encounters them in the lives of the people she paints. But this is not what is being proposed, here, by social painting.

She is not an activist who has gone off in search of the underdog in the way an artist in the 1930s like Walker Evans might have traveled to the American South looking for poverty and exploitation. Rather, as an American who has been living in Singapore since 2005 as a professor at the Nanyang Technological University, Kelly gravitated towards the city state’s red-light district because it reminded her, in its gregarious, vital, vivid character, of her native Baltimore, at least in comparison with the stultifying, sterile atmosphere that she finds pervasive in Singapore. In the street cafés, people talked across tables. It was the first time she could have spontaneous relations with strangers.

The paintings, in other words, were as much social in the sense of social intercourse as in terms of social problems. As soon as a sensitive painter like Kelly makes meaningful contact with Thai prostitutes or Bangladeshi day laborers, however, the distinction between these qualifiers dissolves. To know her subjects’ lives and realities is inextricably to empathize with them.

When Kelly makes a painting of Zen, the fleshy, rotund Chinese woman perched on a blue sofa in “Throw the Lily Under the Couch” (2008), one foot stretched out onto the chair in front of her, fixated by her cell phone, the artist is as much painting her story as her skin, her situation as her visage. Zen is a former sex worker who has retired from the game now that her husband, a former client, is released from jail and working in a coffee shop, and that the couple shares a $58 per month apartment. Zen brings verbal as much as visual information to the canvas. Kelly of course pays Zen for her time, but the relationship is not the passive one of painter using model so much as an active one of painter and model melding their energies together. The canvas is a shared social space.

The canvas, indeed, becomes, quite literally, a social network in “Zones of Contact” (2010). This dense composition initially recalls allegorical painting in the western tradition, or...
else a frozen, interactive moment in a movie. A seated man is at his laptop; a buxom, supine woman looks up into his face from the ground; various onlookers crowd around. The figures are Southeast Asian except for one insistent onlooker, a Chinese man in a blue shirt. But Kelly is not responsible for “casting” this ensemble or for generating a storyline. As she frequently allows for in her ambitious, multi-figure paintings, anyone who wants to is invited to be in the painting. Those that come together generate the meaning of the work by the poses they adopt and the values or attitudes they project. The woman on the ground is a sex-worker – large, powerful, alluring, and yet not so much the latter to distract the men from the cold, empty, remote technology, the computer screen, that galvanizes their attention.

The Bangladeshi men she paints, clustered in nervous recreation in the squares of the “Little India” red-light district, are “foreign workers” with a legal status distinct from the artist’s own as “foreign talent.” In contrast to her, they cannot bring family with them. They will spend the first year paying off the exploitative agents who brought them over. The style in which Kelly has painted their group portrait, under the trees and awnings of the neighborhood, has a naïveté akin to paintings by Pierre Bonnard. Despite the figures’ ill ease there is a sense of idyll in this depiction of recreation. The paint handling contrasts with the tighter realism of the larger, narrative paintings (each of Kelly’s series has its own, distinct style) or the stylized approach of her portraits of Indian or Thai sex workers. It is as if the restless painterly touch seeks to capture the collective nostalgia, a longing for home, felt by these men in their rest hours.

While some of Kelly’s larger paintings are made in her studio, or in the dwellings of her sitters, her regular practice is to work directly from life, and on location. There are photographs of her out in the streets, whether of Singapore, Kolkata, or Shenzhen, China, with easel and large canvas, painting with the avidity of a street photographer. She stands out in no small part thanks to her shock of frizzy red hair, an oddity in these Asian locales. She is not painting landscapes, however, but people – individuals and groups, posed or naturally disposed. She is a social painter not just for depicting a segment of society but also for working in society. She is not a “society” painter in the way you might say of John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), to whom the glamorous and great would go to have lavish portraits made of themselves. And yet she is as much like Sargent as she is, say, like Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942), Sargent’s contemporary, who would surreptitiously capture the working or middle classes at their leisure – the flaneur insinuating himself into the crowd. Kelly is in and of the crowd, and she has set herself up, openly, to paint those of the crowd who want to be painted.

And those that particularly want to be painted are precisely those who would otherwise be invisible. Being the subject of a painting – in a way that is not the case with a photograph – still has connotations of privilege and exclusivity, even if you are not in a position to be the likely owner of the painting when it is finished. As you pose, there is the “as if” feeling that this is what it would be like if you were a glamorous lady of leisure ready to immortalize yourself in paint. Indeed, the women who sit for Kelly invariably spin fabulous and improbable narratives. The Singaporean sex-workers never give their actual names, and the sagas of how they got to be where they are, or the yarns spun of how they have clients in love with them about to whisk them off into marriage, fall within predictable tropes of longing and fantasy.

In Kolkata, Shikah, a sex worker born into a brothel, organized all the women for the artist, working assiduously to bypass the corrupt NGO officials, charged to protect the women from disease but now adding a layer of exploitation to their lives. Kelly paid each woman for her time, and everyone wanted to be painted, as much for the thrill and for the escape from the monotony of their working lives as for the cash reward. There was great jealousy, and everyone knew each other’s business so there was no way she could spend longer on one woman, or do her more than once, as the others would know about it and raise a ruckus. Consequently, Kelly moved into monotone drawing (in oils) to produce the highly stylized sequence, “Women in Kolkata” (2008-11). The girls would put on saris and bindi dots when they sat for her, just like the “proper married women” they are not. The portrait is thus a space for the projection of an idealized self.

While the Indian sex workers elicit portraits of social aspiration, the Thai sex workers’ portraits are social in a yet more explicit sense: they participate not only in the construction of the image, but in its painting, too. The Indians were each invited to inscribe their own names on the canvas, but with the Thais Kelly found herself going a significant step further. They are fishing village girls brought over on the false promise of lucrative contracts. In fact, the only money they will make will be from tips, as
documents in an imported realist language what she notices, but instead interacts through paint and through the act of painting with individuals who become, via painting, more fully her equals. Difference is neutralized upon the picture plane as surely as geographical and social distances are compressed in cyberspace. Oxymoronically, globalization flattens.

Social networks are being credited with revolutionary activity around the world, whether in Tehran, Tel Aviv, or Tunis. Joan Marie Kelly re-invigorates the historic potential for painting – so old, slow, and visceral a technology – to effect perceptual change.

From series to series, each stylistic variant – the cool, distant neutrality of the studio paintings, the looser, most empathic painterliness of the scene paintings of men in squares, the stylization of the Indian sex workers, and the primitivism of the Thai sex workers – is determined by a kind of social contract between painter and subject. We sense, through style, her becoming more enmeshed in the society of those she paints. But even at their most exotic, the Thai paintings, an initial sense of affinity with the primitivism of Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) is dispelled when we learn that the naïve handling is literally the hand of the naïf, the intervention of the subject in her own depiction. Kelly has not, like Gauguin the retired stockbroker, turned east in search of the Other. Rather, a migrant worker herself, she has simply found subjects in her new environment. And she depicts an actuality that incrementally changes by the fact of her painting it.

She neither projects what she brings from “home” onto the people and situations she encounters, nor merely

David Cohen

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Brothels of Rabindra Sarani
by Joan Marie Kelly

This body of work culminates paintings created from personal encounters with marginalized communities during the last 4 years. The paintings were made in neighborhoods of Bangladesh construction workers in Singapore, and in the brothels of female sex workers in Kolkata India. The traditions of perceptual painting and Western figure painting, are a means of communicating with communities where there is no infrastructure for such communication. Perceptual painting directly looks, studies, and maps visual forms. I am mapping forms of the body over and over again while spending time with the subject. It is an intimate relationship; such scrutiny requires trust. The relationship is centered on the artifact that traces in time the briefly joined experience that often extends to new friendships.

In Singapore the Bangladesh construction workers are supplying the human energy vital to the creation of Singapore’s impressive skyline. I am also a “foreign worker” in Singapore, yet our capacity to interact with society is very different from each other. I can legally bring my family with me and I am paid a wage that allows me to rent a flat at market rates. In contrast, the Bangladesh worker is living “single” in over crowded spaces specifically allocated for them with very limited social and economic rights.

Coming up from the underground metro one might think they are in a South East Asian town. I frequent a small public square where rhythmic music vibrates from storefronts and workers congregate in the evenings. The men are in a public space yet spending more time talking on their hand-phones than with each other. As I set up my easel everyone comes by to investigate what I’m doing. The Bangladesh men are gracious, and immediately willing to participate. I tell them where to be if they want to be in the painting. They are willing to share their stories of their country, their struggles and above all their hopes. Many of the workers cannot speak English but give a robust response to the visual language of painting. There is a sense of pride that I have chosen to paint them as my subject.

I also spent time working with the female sex workers in the brothels of Rabindra Sarini, Kolkata India for three consecutive winters. Amitava Malakar introduced me to Shikha Das, a sex worker who was born in the brothel. After getting to know each other Shikha decided to take on my project. I paid all the women for posing; a 500 Rupee note which is about 15 US dollars for an hour, Shikha set the price.

The women dressed to have me paint their portrait, wearing sari and bindi dot on their foreheads as proper Hindu married women. I painted them, as they want to be seen often times not recognizing them on the street. The majority of the women were telling a similar story of being driven to the brothel, running away from a husband who terrorized them. Their families, immersed in poverty cannot take the woman back and risk having one more mouth to feed.

Shikha was born in the brothel and proud of being a sex worker. As part of managing my project she cooked for me, delicious Bengali delicacies of fish, mutton, and chicken in sauces with the uniquely Bengali mustard. One day I said I would be happy with just rice and dhal. Shikha gasped, “That’s the dinner of a married woman! I didn’t become a sex worker for nothing!”
December is winter in Kolkata. The pollution is trapped under the low clouds giving a soft grey tone to everything, adding to the surreal atmosphere. I walk the narrow smoky alley to the black doorway of the brothel that has no actual door. I feel my way with my feet and hands through the wet floor and damp cement walls. It’s as if I am moving through a cave, pitch black then suddenly light. I’ve reached the center of the brothel. It’s open air with no roof. The sudden light gives way to women bathing and washing clothes. The perimeter is a square with rooms off the outside of the square. Shikha lives in a room on the third floor. As soon as I walk around to the narrow winding stairway, it’s pitch black again. I feel my way up the steps of loose brick, finally reaching the next floor saying “Namaste” to the women who recognize me. There is no running water in the brothel. To cook and clean, the women must haul buckets of water up these same crumbling stairs in the dark.

Shikha was in her room with a man selling Kashmiri shawls. I drop my easel and began to make my way back down, stepping in between women cooking outside the doors of their rooms on makeshift stoves as the smoke goes up the center of the brothel. I saw another woman I painted last time. She was making food in a niche in the wall outside the building in the narrow alleyway. I could see her through the smoke. There was a noise, I looked up and out of the smoke came a stretcher held shoulder height with a man laying flat on his back, filled with flowers. The dead man was almost pushed into me. His body swiped under my nose. Disoriented I went back up with the rest of my things. I enter Shikha’s room, cozy, colorful deep greens and ultramarine blue walls, full of memories. She has a bed and enough room in front of it for a refrigerator and a chair. Most of the rooms open to the edge of the bed and the women store all her things under the bed. Chai first, of course. She hands me a small handmade smoke fired terracotta cup of tea. The maker’s hands in mine, the aromas of cardamom and the wood of the kiln hit me all at once.

Shikha says I’m painting her today. I’m sitting on the bed and she stands in front of the door about four feet from me. She said, “start.” She wanted to know if I wanted her in a sari. No, I want her to be the way she is comfortable. She had on a bright pink sack dress. The sex worker I had recognized downstairs came up and poked her head into the room. Her shape was interesting with half her body in the room as she spoke with Shikha. I asked her to pose too. Both women are posing. I draw her into the painting.

A short while later Shikha went out to the hallway. I could tell by Shikha’s tone something was wrong. A man entered Shikha’s room. He is representing an NGO. He came in the room to see my painting. Shikha said he was married to one of the sex workers. He made his purpose clear. The people on the ground working for the Durbar Mahila Sammanayee Samiti NGO wanted me out. He declared the women can make money through sex anyway they want but they can’t make money posing for a painting. I was painting Shikha’s face when we were interrupted. She had looked proud and happy but coming back to the pose she was different. Her features were enraged. Her nostrils were swollen as if she could have blown smoke. I tried to do her face over again, now she was moving a lot. I wanted to capture the angry expression. I kept trying. She was now tilting her head up in defiance. I had to keep changing it. We decided to take a lunch break. After lunch I got back to work again. Her expression was again different, now one of resignation.

As a result of the NGO notification, Shikha organized sex workers in neighboring buildings. We relocated to the rooftop of another brothel each day. The women primed my canvases, stored the wet paintings in their rooms, and prepared meals. The NGO eventually discovered us. They told Shikha I would take their images to the press and their families would be publicly humiliated. The NGO representative called Shikha at night telling her that on the way to my guesthouse I was robbed and beat up. As an outsider I cannot understand the complexity of the social order. I didn’t interrupt the work but, I became very careful. Just before the last month of work I made contact with the President of the NGO, Dr. Jana. He immediately responded. Dr. Jana’s letter gave complete autonomy to Shikha to decide how she wants to handle our work. Sixty-three women were painted in total. We ended the work in peace. We had a real community working together. The women signed all of their painting, some on the back and some on the front. The final day when I came to get the last of my paintings all the children were running down the alley to the street to meet my cab. My paintings were in their arms and over their heads. The women gathered in the street in front of the cab. Everyone was hugging each other. No, I don’t have many photographs. The women are very sensitive to photographs.

I’m left with a deep sense of connection and bridges crossed. We are all urban women using the resources
we have to survive. We were born in different places and as a result have different opportunities. Shikha and the rest of the women are intelligent and talented. Imagine the organizational and communication skills Shikha drew upon to make this work happen under the complexity of the circumstances. I hope the paintings can be a testament to the real people behind the statistics; numbers and bar graphs that are the only experience most of us have with human beings that have been cast out of society yet have vibrant capabilities and imaginations.

Shikah’s room

Shikah Das priming canvases on the roof top of the brothel. Kolkata, India.
“Bangla Men Late Night”

“Bangla Men Late Night” casts the setting of the neighborhoods of the Bangladesh workers in Singapore, where the men pass the few hours they are not working or sleeping.
2010
Oil on Canvas  36” x 50”
“Bangla Men late Night I”

Although in public space, they spend their time talking on their hand phone.
Bangladesh construction workers watching the game.
2010
Oil on Canvas  11” x 14”
“Bangla Men late Night III”

Little India, Singapore.
2010
Oil on Canvas  11” x 14”
“Bangla Men late Night IV & V”
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Little India, Singapore.
“Zones of Contact,” urban neighborhoods where Bangladesh workers, Singapore professionals, pimps and sex workers connect in the name of money, desire and survival. I brought this canvas into the street, proposing that anyone who wants to be in the painting can. These are the people that stepped into the painting, posing on the street. Little India, Singapore.
2008

Oil on Canvas 52” x 42”

“Bangladesh Construction Worker as Sensuous and Desirable”

This painting was made in response to a Straits Times article written about the paintings of sex workers and Bangladesh foreign workers Joan Kelly made on the streets of Singapore. The Headlines asked the question “I’d understand if they painted landscapes or beautiful objects but why ugly people and drunkards....?”
“Zen” is a Chinese Sex worker who posed while reading the messages from clients and singing Hokkien songs in the studio.
2009
Oil on Canvas 75” x 45”
“Night Negotiations”

The couple posing are an Indian man and Chinese woman.
2010
“Thai Sex Workers Lounging”
Oil on Canvas  40” x 30”

The nucleus of the Thai brothel is a lounge abounding with Buddhist shrines.
2011
Oil on Canvas 32” x 22”
“Pai, a Thai Sex Worker”

This painting was made in Thai the brothels of Singapore with Thai sex worker, Pai. Pai, joined in the painting with me by picking up the brushes and working into the canvas a narrative of her hometown on the Mekong.
Running from the NGO, we lead a guerrilla operation of painting on the rooftop of a different brothel each day. Forty-three paintings were made in total.
2010
Oil on Canvas 52” x 28”
“Sex Worker on the Roof Top in
Kolkata III”
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Kolkata India.
2010
Oil on Canvas 40” x 30”
“Sex Workers on the Roof Top in Kolkata IV

Kolkata India.
2010
Oil on Canvas 36" x 30"
“Durga ”

Kolkata India.
2010
Oil on Canvas 36” x 30”, 48” x 30”
“Sex Worker on the Roof Top in Kolkata V, VI”

Kolkata India.
2009
Oil on Canvas 14” x 11”
“Portraits of the Women in Rabin-dra Sarini”

These small head portraits are the very first paintings made with the women in Kolkata. There are twenty three in total.
2011
Oil on Canvas 75” x 45”
“Gonga’s Son”

Gonga’s sons in her room, in the brothel.
2011
Oil on Canvas 40” x 36”
“Sons of Sex Workers Hanging-out in the Alley”

Many of the sons hang out in the alley’s, some had jobs and helping support their mothers.
2012
The Public Art of Joan Marie Kelly
“Zones of Contact”

Design by I-Hsuan Cindy Wang
Photography of Paintings by Quek Jai Liang
Paper by RJ Paper_Victor
Print by Dominie Press PTE. Ltd
Funding by Nanyang Technological University
Research Grant Title:
Transformation, and Preservation of Intangible Heritage Through the Artistic Lens

I want to give special thanks for the constant support and encouragement from very good friends and family:

Shikah Das, Kolkata
Amitava Ganguly, Kolkata
Bhaskar Mukapadhyay, Kolkata
Amitava Malakar, Kolkata
Iftikharhul Bashar, Bangladesh
Damien Tridant, Kolkata
Kakoli Sengupta, Kolkata
Zen, Singapore
Paul Khoo Singapore
Arul Chib, Singapore
Barbara Grossman, New York City
Sarah Schuster, Ohio
Pai, Thailand
David Cohen, New York City
Phillip Baldwin, New York City
Joe Upham, New York City
Maureen and Carter Warfield, Maryland
Neal and Barbara Kelly, Maryland

The title, “Zones of Contact”, is originally the title of the 2006 Sydney Biennale artistic director and curator Charles Merewether.