



canadianinterviews

a portrait of canada, one interview at a time



Just twenty-eight years old, Sheila Kernan has quickly risen to prominence in Canadian art circles. Her imaginative, almost utopian cityscapes are especially stunning.

“ My focus is on the potential of a city. I find with so much bad in the world I like to bring attention to the good. I like the idea of someone waking up every morning and looking at my work and feeling happy. ”

Light in the City

Interview with Sheila Kernan

Even the word ‘vibrant’ seems inadequate when attempting to describe paintings by Calgary-based artist Sheila Kernan. Perhaps it is more accurate just to say that there is often pure joy shimmering in her work. Practically every piece is exciting to study simply to observe the colour combinations that she manages to assemble.

Immediately the depictions of city scenes stand out. Her representations of busy streets, quiet alleyways and public spaces absorb the viewer instantly.



Double Back, Sheila Kernan
Mixed Media, 2011, 36x72x1.5”

The detail built into the cityscapes is definitely thought provoking. Where billboards and signs would exist in reality, Kernan inserts an eclectic mix of imaginative designs. The result is an aesthetic approach that emphasizes the potential for reinvention, thought, and even a state of bliss. “The city has so much going on already but the billboards add more visual interest to the city with the colours and letters,” the twenty-eight year old explains. “Once again I am more interested in how light behaves than replicating an advertisement or a fast food sign. The billboards create a blank canvas for me to explore other things that interest me like my love for vintage fabric design, wallpapers, art nouveau and patterns.”

Kernan regularly incorporates features from various cities into one painting. In the piece ‘Double Back’, for example, she notes that there are elements of New York, San Francisco and Toronto. This technique often has the effect of making an image feel somehow familiar yet never confining ... and potentially even liberating! Once it is known that the component parts of a given urban scene are diverse in origin, viewers are ostensibly welcomed into the space as well, free to imagine the potential of being in a city, regardless of which city that might be. Kernan builds a sense of harmony into her cityscapes by bringing together what would otherwise remain apart. “The togetherness and unity in my work probably stems from my constant battle between realism and the abstract world,” she says. “I love making work that is more linked to an experience rather than an accurate depiction.”

Sheila Kernan grew up in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. A graduate of the Alberta College of Art and Design, success has come quickly for the talented artist. Already her work can be found in galleries across Canada. Chalk up her rapid rise to the wonder of paintings that just seem to say ‘welcome, feel at home, stay a while ...’

CI: I thought that a simple way to start would be to ask you to compare your process when painting urban scenes with your approach to painting rural or wilderness landscapes. Does your approach change from one to the other? Typically do you take photos and work from those, or do you sketch quite a lot? How often, if ever, will you paint a scene ‘on the spot’?

SK: My approach for all my work begins with taking photos for resource material. Wherever I go I always have my camera by my side to record my experiences with the world. I try to hike a lot during the summer months, collecting new resource material to use during the year. When I travel to different cities I like to wander aimlessly around the city, taking it in, absorbing the culture and energy of a place and recording my journey. Often when I sit down to create a painting I will look at my photographs I get printed out and make mini collages and create new compositions with both imageries. I will combine buildings from different cities together in one piece or invert a waterfall to create a new place.

I love the idea that my work is both based in reality – specific locations – as well as my imagination or invention of places via my mini collages. From my collages I get basic composition but then I like to do exploratory drawings to further develop an idea. Often I will also do little colour sketches so that I can work through colour palettes. I like giving myself new challenges: changing the colours to different seasons or imagining what a nighttime scene would look like during the day, etc.

I used to sketch more outside but now I like just experiencing the moment and using the photographs to prompt my memory about a place. I will reflect a lot of my journeys while I am working on a series. I don't do plein air painting very often simply because of the massive amount of brushes, palette knives, etc., that I use to create my work. It would be a lot to haul around. However this year I have given myself a challenge: I leave in August to paint with an artist I admire. All I will be doing is painting on the spot. It will be an interesting challenge. I am so looking forward to how it will influence my work!

CI: Regarding your cityscapes, it seems to me that there is an element of fantasy at work, where you almost view the urban vistas as full of light and possibility. I am wondering about the darkness and despair of cities: homelessness, environmental degradation, and so on. Have you consciously chosen to ignore such sad things in your work? Are you more interested at this stage in highlighting what it means to imagine the potential of a city?

SK: What I truly love about the city is the idea of endless possibilities! Cities are places where dreams come true. As a child I grew up in Saskatoon, SK, which is not a large city. I remember my family going to Toronto on a trip when I was 4 or 5 and the feeling of the city was so energizing for me. ...

I am drawn to the speed, vibrancy and edgy buzz that emanates from city life. It has completely captured my attention. Stimulating my senses, I am completely fixated on how the city goes through a transformation at night. Flickering neon lights cast amazing patterns and reflections onto majestic buildings and structural forms. Light becomes the defining characteristic of the space, camouflaging the structural design, letting new life into the atmosphere. With endless possibilities in a continually changing environment, I carefully examine the subtle shifts between

each moment of time. The soft buzz from the neon lights, gusts of wind from fast moving cars whizzing by both give way to a multitude of sounds. The rhythm of the city leaves a constant beat in my head, stirring my imagination. I am ready to explore!

The darkness and despair of a city is definitely an important issue that we need to be made aware of with systems put in place to help. I am a strong advocate of giving back as every year I try to donate artwork to charities that raise money for community enhancement, such as UNICEF, Rotary, Chickwagon (YWCA) and more. My focus is on the potential of a city. I find with so much bad in the world I like to bring attention to the good. I like the idea of someone waking up every morning and looking at my work and feeling happy.



Wakeful Dreams, Sheila Kernan
Mixed Media, 2011, 24x48”

CI: In a painting like ‘Wakeful Dreams’, the 2011 mixed media piece, it is intriguing to observe that, where in a city there would be billboards and logos and neon lettering, you have chosen to place a variety of colourful patterns. Why is this the case? Would it be fair to say that you find some beauty in the brilliant colours and designs of advertising billboards, yet you wish to turn away from the blunt commercialism of such signs?

SK: Exactly! I love that you have picked up on this. The city has so much going on already but the billboards add more visual interest to the city with the colours and letters. Once again I am more interested in how light behaves than replicating an advertisement or a fast food sign. The billboards create a blank canvas for me to explore other things that interest me like my love for vintage fabric design, wallpapers, art nouveau and patterns.

My love of fabric and patterns probably stems from my grandmother. At a very young age (7) she taught me to sew, and we would often have sewing weekends at her house where I would get to design and create a piece of clothing to wear. I actually was going to go into fashion design before I enrolled in art school to become a painter. Sometimes I will even make mini paintings in the billboards, like little Hans Hoffman inspired abstracts or Mark Rothko colour field paintings. I want to keep lots of visual interest in my pieces and like that there are so many layers to them, similar to a city – so many different things to look at.

If I was interested in replicating a specific place I would put the sign indicators like fast food billboards in my work (I would probably paint more photorealistic too), but I love that they can be anywhere you wish them to be. I am not painting a specific place but rather an imaginary one. I do find beauty in the designs of the advertisements. I love how advertisements wrap buildings. The juxtaposition of old and modern architecture next to modern advertising is intriguing. It creates a visual break. I like to reflect that in my work. I am not overtly turning away from the blunt commercialism of signs. I just don't feel that they are necessary in my work. It's not what it's about. Plus, if I remove them, it makes the image more universal. It can be anywhere, as there are no specific indicators making it a specific place.

CI: The title 'Wakeful Dreams' is provocative in itself. How often do images from dreams enter into the painting process for you? Or, are you hinting more at the idea that the chaos of our dreams is reflected to some degree in the disorder of our contemporary, technological cityscapes?

SK: Hmm... I dream a lot and have very real dreams (I can perfectly describe a home I was in or a meadow with every flower in it). I will often wake from my dreams and remember them so vividly I will think for a moment that something from them actually happened. In addition to my dreams I will also wake up and have a problem I was thinking about solved, like what colours to use in a painting or what layer I want to tackle next. So the imagery from my dreams may not be replicated in my paintings but I feel that the imagination is at play in our dreams and it only enhances what I do. This title just came to me when I looked at the painting. The colours are more vibrant to what a normal city looks like, so it's make believe dreamlike. Like a dream wishing I was there!

CI: Recently I have done interviews with some young Canadian artists – like the west coast artist Meghan Hildebrand, or the Calgary duo Dave and Jenn – and in viewing paintings from such artists, it almost looks as though the landscapes have exploded. I feel like these artists are acknowledging the great extent to which we have disrupted the natural world, and then are trying to establish a new kind of harmony or unity almost on a daily basis. In your work, the scenes seem to retain some fundamental, original unity – in terms of your vision as an artist, what is the source of this *togetherness*?

SK: I look at my city scenes and my landscapes as two completely different subjects. Sometimes I will blend the two together but often not. It's my dual personality and love for the natural world and urban life. I love getting completely lost in nature, hiking up a mountain and feeling lost. On the flip side, I feel that so much culture is cultivated in a city. I love exploring new places and seeing the art that comes from large urban centers.

The togetherness and unity in my work probably stems from my constant battle between realism and the abstract world. I love making work that is more linked to an experience rather than an accurate depiction. However my formal background training in photorealistic portraiture keeps me from leaving realism completely and thus having some kind of fundamental, original unity. I often feel a pull to create work that accurately represents a place.

I feel that I am a little old school at heart and admire the work of great masters like Renoir, Degas, and the Group of Seven. This may be where tradition and cohesion enter my work. It was in art school that I began to push myself and fell in love with contemporary art. Basically I wanted to find a unique way to describe my experiences. I love all kinds of media and working with my hands and could not limit myself to one medium in particular. Instead I am drawn to using everything and anything to get the job done.

It could also be my personality creating this ‘togetherness’ and it comes out in my work. I have a very structured side to my mind. I am very mathematical, linear, and precise.



Roadside, Sheila Kernan
Mixed Media, 2010, 24x36”

CI: Having asked the question about what gives unity to your work, there are a few paintings where I thought there was some fragmentation. Specifically, I am thinking of the 2010 work ‘Roadside’ – I felt like the clouds and fields and grasslands are rather digitized, comprised almost of floating pixels. Has your work been impacted in some measureable way by digital media? I am just intrigued by the idea of our sight becoming increasingly ‘scrambled’ ...

SK: Definitely I am impacted by digital media. I use a digital camera to record my experiences. I am exposed to movies, cinema, iPhones, computer screens, etc. I get ideas from anywhere and everywhere, including modern technology. Anything that is visual impacts me and my work. Originally, my idea to create out-of-focus work with areas of clarity (the crisp lines from flat stenciled paint) and textured blobs stems from my glasses. As someone who wears glasses I am always aware of the edges of my lenses. I can see an out of focus area, and if I move my eyes back and forth it can create a “scramble”. This is especially apparent when it’s raining at night and you’re walking outside in the city. The raindrops disrupt your line of vision and create little circles of reflected light scrambling your vision. I like it when it rains on the camera lens too. It also creates a visual ‘scramble’.

The dots in my work definitely make the work feel digitized. Sometimes like in ‘Roadside’ it’s more apparent. That could have something to do with scale of the work. I did a lot of silk screening when I was in art school and we did a lot of digitization of imagery. ... This fragmentation, while sometimes deliberate, could also be the mood I was in when I was creating the piece. As every painting is a little piece of who I am, my mood and what I am thinking about will no doubt come through in what I do. It has too! I love that there are so many layers to my work. I like that up close the images dissolve into abstract fragmented blobs. While the farther back you step away from my work, it begins to look photographic. While I work I often look at my paintings from many angles and distances to get the effects I am going for. I hope to create many levels of visual interest and capture your attention both up close and from afar.



***Surely You Will Remember, Sheila Kernan
Mixed Media, 2011, 30x60”***

CI: Perhaps you could offer some insight into where the titles come from for your paintings. In particular, there is something very appropriate about ‘Surely You Will Remember’ – almost picking up on how the blur of the city can obliterate our capacity to remember what we have seen! When you title a painting, are you trying to capture something essential about the work, or do you find yourself attempting to be more suggestive?

SK: I look at every painting and try to find a title that fits the piece. Often titles or sayings will pop into my head when I am making a piece, which may be why they seem appropriate to each piece. ‘Surely You Will Remember’ is a very compelling title for me. I was reflecting on a trip and just felt that this piece has a familiarity to it that maybe others would pick up on as well. I love your interpretation of it: “almost picking up on how the blur of the city can obliterate our capacity to remember what we have seen!” Something I love that I know others see, but may not remember so vividly like I do, is when you are watching movies – I love it when the opening credits (or other b roll in the film) have out of focus and then in focus shots of the city. We are inundated with so much footage of beautiful majestic cities in cinema I often find myself pausing the film and watching the b roll again and again, ingraining it into my memory, as there is a beauty to it that draws me in. So sometimes I am suggestive and sometimes the title is capturing something essential about the piece. It’s the icing on the cake for me. It completes the work. ...

CI: Final question: where do you envision your work heading next? Do you plan to continue in a similar vein to what you have been doing, or is there some project that you have in the back of your mind that diverges a bit?

SK: I am always trying out new things to evolve my work: new textures, media, and challenging myself to stretch and try new subject matter, compositions and techniques. I love art and art making, so I love seeing how different types of art making influences my core body of work. For instance I learned a lot about soft washes from watercolours (even though I don't do them often). I learned about transparency and layering from glasswork (glass blowing and fusing techniques). I have tried everything from bronze casting to glasswork to sewing, silk-screening, sculpture drawing, interior design (my own home of course). ... I love it all. I have a constant need to try new things and ideas even if they don't work out. Right now I am working through some encaustic ideas. I have also planned a trip where I will only be doing plein air painting with a very limited palette focusing on interpreting what I see in front of me. I am very excited!

I love new challenges, and as for where my work will head next, I am just as excited as you to find out! Life experiences and developing ideas reveal new directions to explore. I keep an idea book where I write a lot and do little testers to help me record the many ideas that come to me while working, sleeping and of course just experiencing life.

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