

Social Painting David-Cohen

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 Chinese man is an “uncle” as in the euphemism for a pimp.~~

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 Senzhen, 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” (2008-2011). 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 the brothel takes all, and those are likely to be negligible as the clients are the Bangladeshis. The girls are destined to spend a month “selling” themselves for nothing until their 30-day tourist visas expire and they can be bused home. Appalled that they had nothing to divert themselves in their empty brothels - which they couldn’t leave for fear of the police - Kelly gave the girls sketchbooks; impressed by their drawings of Buddhist shrines and other memories of home, she had them paint these motifs into the backgrounds of her portraits of them. To extend the Facebook analogy of Kelly’s social painting, they were authorized to post on their painter friend’s homepage.

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 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. Oxymoronicly, globalization flattens.

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