

Catalog Essay for Kansas City Collection III

By Dana Self

“Always looking, trying to see, I search for badgers claw, the budding lily, the tooth of a mouse...” – A. Mary Kay

A. Mary Kay finds a visual world in an ordinary mouse’s tooth, suggesting that she searches for something beyond a simple experience of the natural world. Kay reaches into objects to find essence, truth and a spiritual connection.

Like poet Wendell Berry, Kay finds solace and divinity in nature. Her painting is her poetry as she magnifies the infinitesimally small and wondrous things she sees. Growth, decay and microscopic biological systems are enlarged and revealed in Kay’s drawings and paintings.

Her wildly colored canvases and drawings are abstract, yet with recognizable images of flowers, weeds, grasses, or an animal’s jawbone. Shapes derivative of the Kansas prairie are woven between passages of brushy paint or biomorphic shapes.

Kay’s canvases pulsate and glow with saturated colors that often defy sense. And yet, the jumbled and loose paint application feels sensual and free, as if Kay is truly experiencing the inner life of the natural world from the inside out.

“It is the enormity of minutiae, infinite variation, taxonomies and mimicry within the boundaries of my garden that have become catalysts for painting,” Kay states. “The beauty found within the lush zenith of summer’s fecundity contains precariousness, the imminent decline of fall. I feel the rush of life and with it the mystery of the infinite connectedness of everything.”

In her drawing series, *Some of the Sum*, (2002–the present), Kay deploys blacks and whites in abstract gestures, blobs and drips. Feathers, seedpods, pinecones and other forms emerge from the drawings’ chaos. Other drawings are solitary visual poems on the extraordinary objects found at our feet on a quiet walk. Some drawings, with their delicate lines and dim shadows feel like antique, foxed papers found in a botanist’s shuttered laboratory.

Her monumental new work, *Zenith* (2014), shifts from the infinity of a nocturnal space to the illuminated and lush light of day. Geometric lines crisscross the dark blue-black space of the painting in a spider web-like network, but ultimately give way to the explosion of light, flora and exuberance of the rest of the painting.

Sweeping gestures throughout the work unite the composition and the various objects that float through the painting are individual touchstones grounding nature’s chaos.

In Kay’s work, all elements are linked to one another in symbiotic relationships of shapes, color and essence. A painterly pink background feels harmonious with the dark purple- black from which it emerges and with the chimera that float through the painting. Every object is in a state of becoming, changing, growing, decaying. Kay’s devotion to each object’s spirit makes all things, whether microscopic or macroscopic, feel omnipresent in the paradise of the natural world.