

Sharon Kagan

Wall Texts

Life

Born in 1953 in New Jersey and raised in California, Sharon Kagan is the daughter of Lithuanian immigrants who survived the Holocaust as active partisans. She earned a BA in painting, sculpture, and graphic design at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1976.

Before pursuing graduate studies, Kagan worked for two years (1975-77) as an assistant on Judy Chicago's landmark project *The Dinner Party*, a feminist installation in the form of a triangular banquet table with elaborate place-settings, honoring by name some one thousand historically notable women. Kagan then attended the Otis Art Institute, receiving her MFA in sculpture in 1979. Her thesis work was a performance video in which audience members, invited to participate in an ancient Sumerian ritual known as the Sacred Marriage, found themselves in a porno hotel.

Kagan's interest in performance intensified after a 1983 seminar titled "Art as Opera," conducted by the famed Italian-born curator Germano Celant, best known as the champion of *Arte Povera*, a 1960s movement in which "poor" everyday materials were transformed into art through performative or conceptual means. Kagan, who has long been deeply involved with dance (tap, ballroom, tango, salsa, etc.), was inspired to create five performances over the next two years. Near the end of the decade, she dedicated a ritual action in Joshua Tree National Park to her parents, commemorating their efforts to save others from extermination during World War II.

At that time, meditation also became important to Kagan, leading to a life-altering epiphany. After one particularly intense session in 1986, she reports, "I woke up and for three days saw the world the way that physicists and mystics have described. Everything was vibrating. . . . It was all energy." Soon thereafter, Kagan founded the Creativity Center in Santa Monica, which for the next 26 years sought to develop personal vision in artists and nonartists alike. To this day, Kagan herself goes on occasional seven-day spiritual retreats entailing complete verbal silence.

Process

When Kagan's mother died in 2003, the artist took up the older woman's interest in knitting, both as a way of soothing her grief and as a physical expression of human continuity and connectedness. (That year she also coauthored—with Sarah La Saulle—the self-help book *Healing a Broken Heart: A Guided Journal through the Four Seasons of Relationship Recovery*.) Knitting and nets became the basis for numerous sculptures that preceded her current work.

For a time, Kagan drew on ledger paper, bearing associations with record-keeping and transactional accounts, or on Japanese rice paper, a material that she valued for its skin-like quality. Today her drawings and paintings begin with close-up digital photographs of knitting. Using low light and shallow depth of field, Kagan shoots loosely intertwined hemp threads or rope, thereby creating intentional blur, an illusion of volume and spatial depth, and random digital glitches or "artifacts." Together, these elements deliberately undermine the usual representational function of photography, freeing her images to serve as a source of pure forms.

Kagan typically zeroes in on a small section of fabric so intimately that the enlaced strands take on a monumental quality. When the images, already revealing the presence of smaller constituent threads, are greatly enlarged, their surfaces automatically segment into pixels, redoubling the picture's abstract visual complexity.

With a precision pen, Kagan next painstakingly highlights these variegations, outlining the pixels one by one to produce multiple subsidiary patterns within the larger tangle of fibers. In some instances, the work remains a misty gray-scale study; in others, she fills in the pixel shapes with colored pencils to yield an intricate play of patterns and hues. The composition is often further enhanced by a linear grid of multiple lozenge shapes, thus creating a balance between a rationalistic framework and the organic-seeming threads. Finally, certain works are selected to be systematically enlarged—"squared up," in technical parlance—into a medium-size acrylic painting.

Experiencing the Work

Art has always had a therapeutic function for Kagan. For two years in the mid-1990s, she maintained the Love Chapel, a tiny second-floor space next to her studio in a commercial strip, where visitors could come to find contemplative stillness amid an assortment of symbolic objects: an old suitcase, an empty birdcage, an accordion, a drum, a carved Balinese angel, candles, and incense.

Of her more recent drawings and paintings Kagan says, "The goal is to make the eyes dance." The vicarious movement the images induce often affects the entire body, as viewers travel imaginatively among the twisting, interwoven threads depicted with 3D precision on a 2D surface. The spatial complexity in Kagan's earlier sculpture and installation works—such as *Sweater* (2006), a twining, space-devouring collaboration by six artists under the direction of well-known multi-medium veteran Tim Hawkinson—is now compacted into a single picture plane.

These works allude to a time-honored tradition of fabric art, as old as civilization itself, which has been given modern artistic stature by artists such as Sonia Delaunay, Anni Albers, Claire Zeisler, various members of the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s, and (in his recent metallic variations) El Anatsui. As graphic works and paintings, Kagan's images extend a perceptual phenomenon first knowingly exploited in Impressionism and Pointillism, and today practiced expertly by Chuck Close. At a distance, the picture is highly representational; as one approaches, it progressively dissolves into a purely abstract collection of vibrant marks.

Such shifting apprehension is paralleled by the fact that Kagan's depicted forms, though derived from commonplace thread, echo two fundamental extremes of existence. On one hand, they recall DNA strands and other microscopic essential-to-life biological entities; on the other, they evoke the strands that knit the universe together in the "string theory" currently much debated among theoretical physicists. Kagan's images are thus a visual and physiological counterpart to the underlying questions that fascinate her. Where are we in the vast scheme of things? Are there meaningful patterns to our lives?