

A Candy-Obsessed Pop Painter Gets Her Due, Half a Century Later



A new exhibition of the painter Kay Kurt's work includes many of her famous large-scale Pop still lifes of piles of candy. Here, a new work: "Hallelujah," 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Albertz Benda

In 1968, Kay Kurt had a fresh MFA in painting from the University of Wisconsin in Madison and nothing to say with it — until a box of chocolates at a local sweet shop stopped her cold. "I was desperate," Kurt said, laughing. "I was a painter without something to paint. I was an object-oriented person. I needed the color, I needed heft, I needed, you know, volume. I just knew I wasn't an abstract painter, to put it bluntly."

If Pop Art helped flatten the high/low boundary, bonbons were, as Kurt described them, her "velvet hammer," with which she pounded out the remaining lumps. "I think the main thing that Pop offered me was the ability to choose any old subject matter. Everything was up for grabs. I didn't have to feel confined in what I chose to paint."

Lakin, Max. "A Candy Obsessed Pop Painter Gets Her Due, Half a Century Later," *New York Times T Magazine*, January 13, 2017.

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Her translation of that standard sampler selection was her breakthrough in the New Realist style: huge, painstaking and meditative paintings replete in texture and light, which she would work on for years at a time. By the end of the year, she was showing her opalescent visions of Jordan almonds and Jujubes with the storied Kornblee Gallery, which counted the Pop Artists Rosalyn Drexler and Richard Smith among its roster. The following year, Kurt participated in “Pop Art Redefined,” a survey at London’s Hayward Gallery that set out much of Pop’s agenda. By 1973, she was included in the Whitney Biennial.



"Mandel Mandorla / aka Jordan Almonds," 1979. Copyright Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota Duluth

Pop Art burned hot and fast, and by the late '80s, with appetites shifting toward Conceptualism, Kornblee shuttered her gallery and Kurt's canvases receded from the New York spotlight. That is, until this week, when “For All Her Innocent Aims, She Knew Exactly Where She Was Going,” Kurt's first solo New York exhibition in three decades, opens at Albertz Benda.



*"Red 'C,'" 1986.
Courtesy of the artist and Albertz Benda*

Kurt existed within the mounting charge of Pop but was also outside of it, offering a rejoinder to a lopsidedly male affair — she took Claes Oldenburg's manifesto, “I am for the art that a kid licks, after peeling away the wrapper,” and pushed it full tilt, muscling the high-octane aesthetic of the movement into the delicate and feminine forms of gummy Scottie dogs and Swedish Fish. Her slick representations of molded sugar can be slightly unsettling. In “Ever Eat Anything That Made You Feel Like Saturday Night on Tuesday Afternoon,” German Berries languish in a dark pool, licorice tendrils lapping at their edges — a “Garden of Earthly Delights” rendered in glucose and gelatin.

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Where much of Pop was consternated with commercial culture, offering criticism steeped in the language of advertising graphics, Kurt, who lived in Germany for a year after finishing graduate school, relied solely on direct observation. “I wasn’t thinking in terms of a message, ‘Oh, look how we’re such consumers that we have this candy,’” she says. “But it did eventually become interesting to see how different countries looked at candy, and the regard for candy, and how it played a life in the culture of the country, particularly Jujubes.”

Remarkably, throughout her tenure at Jill Kornblee’s gallery, Kurt was considered a New York artist — despite having lived in New York for just two weeks. “My output has never been prolific, but she had enough people in the gallery that she could afford to have an oddball like me,” Kurt said. “It was just great, until she decided to go out of business. The whole tone of what people wanted was changing. Pop had kind of had its day. It was conceptual art, David Salle, Clemente.” And Kurt wasn’t about to start making minimalist polyurethane constructions. “I was no Dan Flavin,” she laughs.



"Triptych," 1967.
Courtesy of the artist and Albertz
Benda

In Duluth, Minn., where she’s lived since 1970, Kurt continued to paint. “I felt really funny at first not having a gallery in New York, and I was extremely upset and nervous about that for a long time, but I kept painting as though I did have a gallery. Which isn’t exactly a realistic idea, but I did, because that’s what I did in life.”

Kurt’s meticulousness will resonate with anyone who never feels satisfied with their own work; in 1972, she missed

inclusion in the mammoth exhibition “Documenta 5” because she was busy working on the selected piece past its deadline. The Albertz Benda show collects nearly all of Kurt’s large-scale paintings alongside her compact graphite drawings, and also serves as the debut of a new painting, which, considering Kurt has been working on it since 1996, is no small thing. Even now, as it’s readied in the gallery, Kurt considers it unfinished. “She was considering adding a layer of varnish,” says Thorsten Albertz, a co-founder of the gallery, “but I hope she doesn’t.”

“There were interruptions,” Kurt says of the painting, an 11-foot-wide jewel box of pastilles and peppermints titled “Hallelujah.” “I did other things, I did some drawings, I did other paintings. I didn’t realize it for a while, I had a block. Each candy seemed to have its own demands. It just took that long to finish it.”

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