



Keren Kroul

Unquiet Territories

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U n q u i e t T e r r i t o r i e s

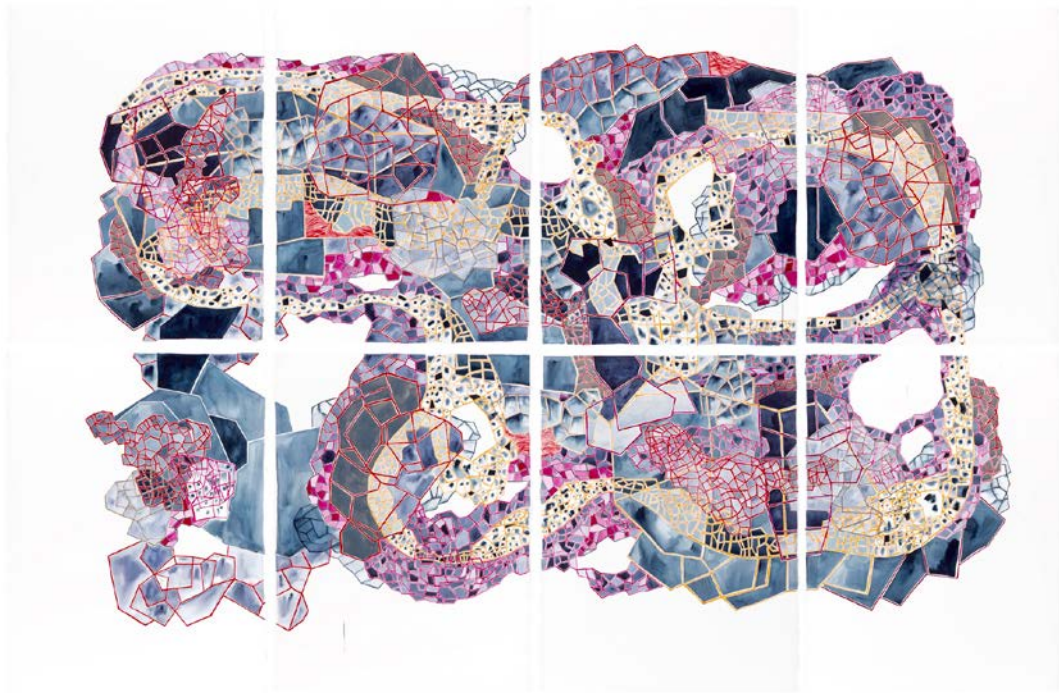
Written by Christina Schmid

Keren Kroul's paintings grow slowly. Though trained in the gestural immediacy and spontaneity of Abstract Expressionism, Kroul works with fine brushes and ambitious formats to slow down and, eventually, lose herself in the process of painting. On the wall of her studio, a handwritten note holds Philip Guston's words: "When you start working, everybody is in your studio—the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas—all are there. But as you continue painting, they start to leave, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave." Creating the conditions for such departures lies at the heart of Kroul's practice.

Time is of the essence in her work: not just time spent painting, but recalling moments from her past. Often, her paintings begin with a distinct memory. Living through an earthquake in Mexico City in the early 1980s, Kroul remembers vividly the green of the living room carpet she

crouched on while the world shook. The hue of green found its way into one of her recent works. In *Purple Braids*, a stylized representation of her grandmother's twin sister's braids weaves through the multilayered composition, threading together personal memories with family stories and cultural reference points of historical heft. Cut in a concentration camp before her untimely death, the braids found their way to the surviving sister who treasured them for the remaining decades of her life. In 2010, she was buried with them. Such stories, moments, and memories spark Kroul's paintings before becoming something else: an exploration of the very workings of memory and its profound unreliability.

Research has shown that each time we recall a memory we effectively rewrite it. Far from a perfect storage system for the past, memory is an ongoing process that resembles a game of telephone, twisting and fraying the elusive original occurrence. There is no certainty in



this state of flux, only memories of memories of memories. The elaborate grids that bulge and billow across Kroul's paintings speak to this amorphous cloud of memories, always in a state of becoming, never fixed, but constantly layering recollections over the initial memory of past events.

From afar, the grids resemble neural networks, data clouds, and the imaginary topographies of distant dreamscapes. Some, where cells begin to resemble reptilian scales, suggest a sense of animacy and hint at movement, barely arrested; others are reminiscent of crystalline structures forged under immense pressure deep in the earth's crust,

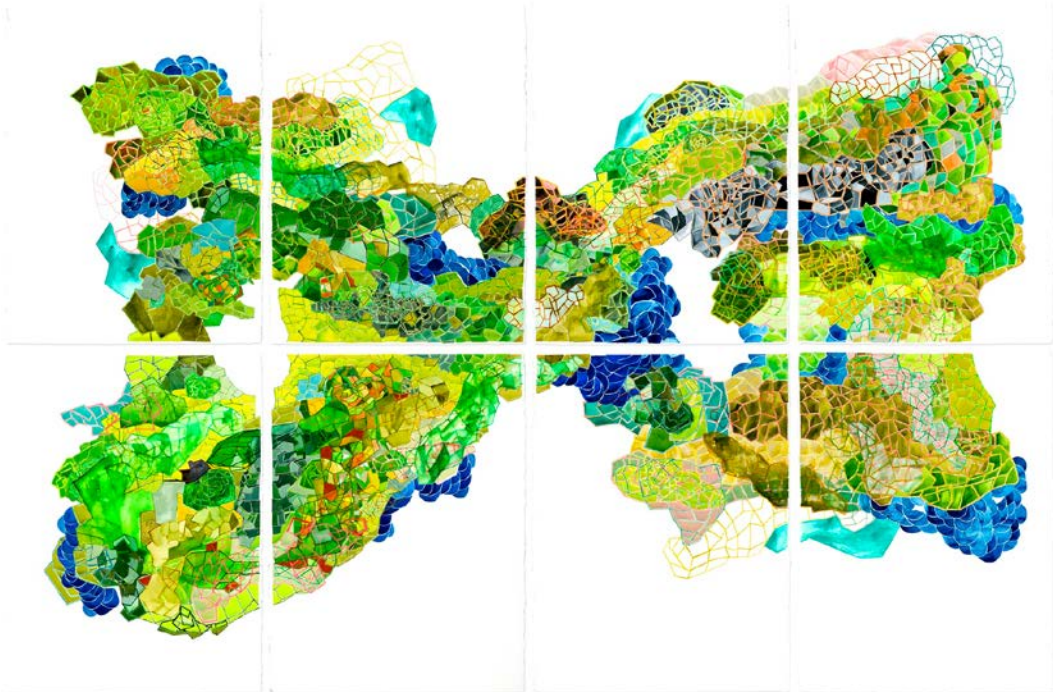
or the symbiotic alliances in lichen, formed only under duress.

The visual affinities to organic and inorganic forms of material self-organization are not accidental. The mind, too, organizes memories, exiling those whose unbearable intensity impedes the flourishing of an organism and allowing for re-integration only when conditions are favorable. Re-remembering, literally putting the pieces back together, cannot be commanded; conscious willpower struggles to reach into the recesses of the unconscious. Brains can be trained, of course; frequently used neurological pathways develop sheaths of myelin. But in

contrast to such habits of thought, Kroul's process, like that of other artists before her, is interested in suspending the control of the rational mind in order to allow for other forms, images, and states of mind to emerge. To a degree, the artist cedes control in order to let a non-volitional agency emerge.

Her practice as a painter relies on an intuitive process that unfolds within the parameters of a distinctive visual language. The constraints of working within a vocabulary of forms enable a nuanced engagement with scale and color. Subtle shifts and the occasional introduction of new marks, rooted in memory, permit variations, a constant rearranging,

layering, twisting, reminiscent of the process of memory itself. *Purple Braids*, the central painting in the installation at Augsburg's Christensen Center Art Gallery, is a case in point. As in previous work, the artist combines a biomorphic grid with individual forms that harbor specific memories. The flock of small green ovals, an organic counterpoint to the amethystine structure it borders, takes the artist back to the metal hoops of her grandmother's window shades in Israel. But unlike in past paintings, the composition grows from the ground up and sprawls across a grid of twelve paper panels. No longer suspended, the visual information appears more grounded



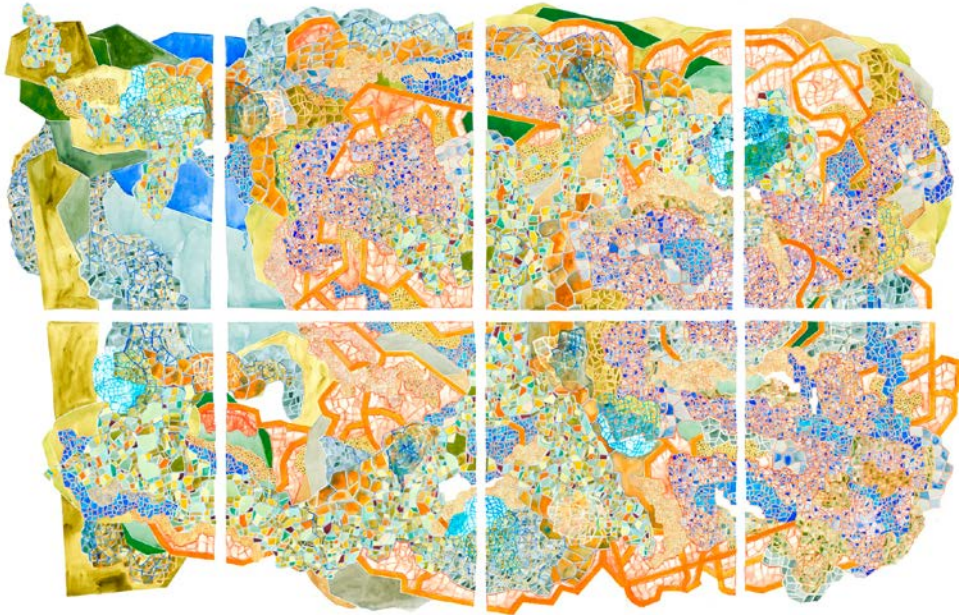


and mounded here. In contrast, *Suspended Thought*, the final work in a series of paintings Kroul finished for an exhibition in summer 2016 at the Artistry in Bloomington, MN, still features a grid of eight panels; the composition hovers there, unmoored. Continuity and subtle departures are the hallmarks of Kroul's oeuvre.

The discipline inherent in her vocabulary of forms also harnesses repetition's strange magic: in spoken language, "the repetition of word sounds not only exaggerates the tempo of an ordinary phrase and not only eventually renders a meaningful phrase nonsense—it can also provoke new ideas, perspectives, and identities. In an enchanting refrain,

sense becomes nonsense and then a new sense of things."¹ Relying on a foundational repertoire allows for sense to turn to nonsense before becoming something else entirely: an emergent sense that only reveals itself through the duration of the process, sensed rather than grasped fully. Thus repetition functions differently here than in a psychoanalytic framework where mastery is the ostensible goal of obsessive repetition. In Kroul's work, mastery is not the point; opening up possibilities for minor variations is.

Time thus becomes key in Kroul's compositional process. Its importance stems not from the oft-fetishized quantity of time spent on a work but



is rooted instead in what the passage of time may grant the artist access to. Specifically, the temporal parameters of her paintings work as a strategy to suspend what Erin Manning calls the “volition-intentionality-agency” triad.² Manning writes, “When we believe we have consciously affected the direction of an event, when we feel that an event has been moved by our volition alone, it is because a backgridding onto the event has taken place that has made sense of the play-by-play. This is usually how we explain our actions, but it is not how we act. How we act is based on a continuous interplay of conscious and nonconscious movement with nonconscious movement playing a vital

part, especially as regards movement’s creative potential.”³ Retrospectively, then, we may project deliberations and explanations onto past actions, and chart relations of cause and effect, intention and completion. This “backgridding” lends a reassuring sense of control to our past actions, claiming them as willed and fully intended, thus capable of proving our mastery. We are in charge, the volition-intentionality-agency triad says. But what if we’re not? What if unconscious impulses act through us all the time? What if our ability to know our very own mind is curtailed by what conscious thought can access and dare imagine? Kroul’s paintings engage such speculation.

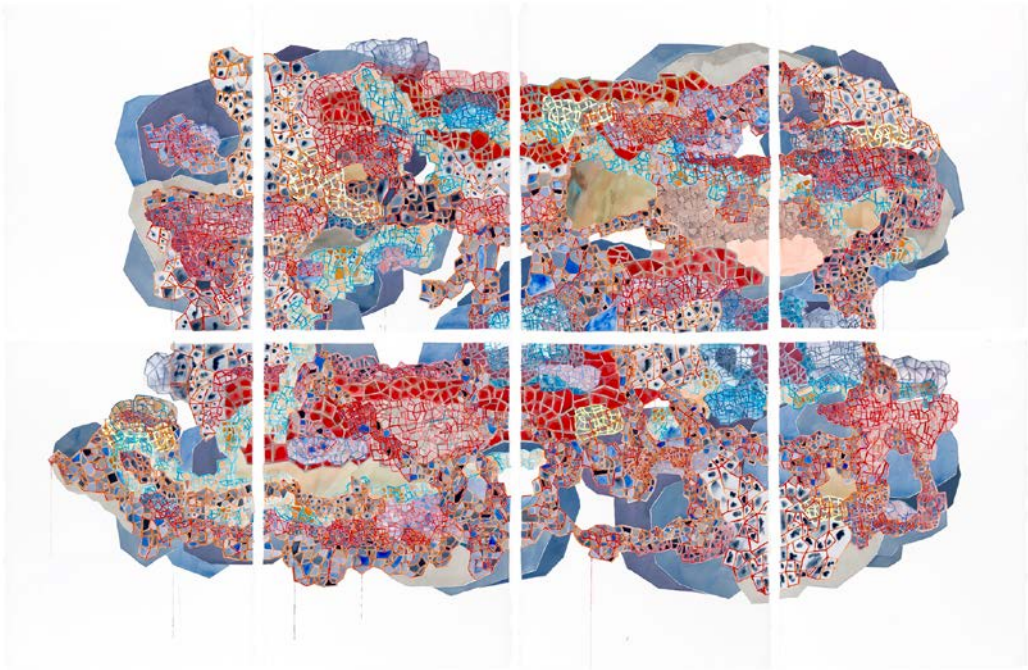
The work, though, does not address these questions head on. They hover in the voids and margins of her work, amid the ever-evolving colorful grids. Using watercolor, Kroul painstakingly traces and re-traces each of the grid's cells. Up close, each cell promises to contain a singularity, especially where pigment and water leave organic-looking marks: as if something incipient was starting to take shape, a honeycomb of ideas and intuitions. Yet there is another grid that the artist consistently employs in her paintings. Although she works in large formats, all of her paintings are composed of individual pieces of paper that act as another structuring device. The edges of the panels do not touch; elegantly ragged, they present an array of fragments, lined up and suggestive of a whole but forever severed.

The panels parse the paintings. They provide a back-grid that tempts oblivion: how easy it is to bracket, forget, and overlook the underlying rectilinear arrangement, especially when colors and torqued forms billow across. The contrast is suggestive of the very movement of the mind, conscious and not. Concepts and thoughts mapped in ways that make sense, categorized, and arranged to support a view of the world that *makes sense*. Yet as we parse and parcel experiences, past and present, into a convenient grid, we may miss the cascading, electric, shimmering mess of what dwells in the not-yet, before language, and “beneath the words.”⁴ Kroul's paintings probe the possibilities of venturing into such unquiet terrains, inching toward such spaces, one small brush stroke at a time.

Endnotes

- 1 Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. 6.
- 2 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016. 6.
- 3 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016. 19.
- 4 The phrase “beneath the words” was coined by autistic Amelia Baggs and quoted by Erin Manning to illustrate ways of filtering information in ways that do not fit a conventional model of neurotypicality. (*The Minor Gesture*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016. 24).

All works watercolor on paper, 60"x96", 2014-2016. Photo credit Rik Sferra.



Keren Kroul

Keren Kroul was born in Haifa, Israel, to an Argentinean father and Israeli mother, and grew up in Mexico City, Mexico, and San Jose, Costa Rica. She holds an MFA in painting from Parsons School of Design (NY) and a BA in fine arts from Brandeis University (MA). Her work has been exhibited at the Minnesota Museum of American Art (MN), Rockford Art Museum (IL), Art

Museum of the University of Memphis (TN), Revolving Museum (MA), Soo Visual Arts Center (MN), Minnetonka Center for the Arts (MN), and Phipps Center for the Arts (WI), among others. Kroul was awarded a 2015 MN State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant, and was featured in the 2016 season of MN Original (TPT–Twin Cities PBS).

Christina Schmid

Christina Schmid thinks with art and writes as critical practice. Her essays and reviews have been published both online and in print, in anthologies, journals, artist books, exhibition catalogs, and digital platforms. She works at the University of Minnesota's

Department of Art in Minneapolis, where she gets to talk about art and theory for a living. Her teaching focuses on contemporary art, mixed with critical theories, framed by cross-cultural currents and driven, always, by deep curiosity.