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Heavy Metal

Sculptor Karen Yank creates large-scale commentaries on nature and the environment

BY MEGAN KAMERICK

Karen Yank got an early taste of success during her last semester of college.

One of her requirements for graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Wisconsin was to fill a room in a large campus gallery. Using a series of pencil-sized steel rods, she created what she calls a “room of dreams and nightmares.” A man who attended the show bought all of the pieces, making her one of the more legendary art grads at UW.

Fast forward 36 years and Yank is one of the most successful artists in New Mexico. She has created more than 50 large-scale sculptures, installed at various locations throughout the state and around the country, as well as many smaller pieces for galleries both local and regional. Each

piece, whether abstract or representational, is a kind of essay in metal that speaks of her lifelong environmental activism and passion for the natural world.

One of her most recent commissions, and also one of her favorites, is *Living Landscape*, installed in July 2019 at the Vista Grande Community Center in Sandia Park. Yank won the commission after a nationwide search for artists as part of Bernalillo County’s 1% for the Arts program. A resident of the area, she was thrilled to have received the commission. Not only has she taught art at the community center but her daughter, Alix, took many classes there when she was growing up.

“I wanted a dialog between two sculptures,” Yank says of her vision for the piece.

The section installed near the road is an abstract interpretation of New Mexico’s natural environment, with the center cut out to allow views of the sky and surrounding landscape. The second part of the sculpture is the cutout, surrounded by

metal sunflowers and cactus that mimic the ones her students used to draw.

“I can’t think of another New Mexico sculptor who has been as successful with public art commissions,” says Tonya Turner Carroll, co-owner of Turner Carroll Gallery in Santa Fe, who has shown Yank’s work since 2014.

Yank grew up steeped in art, thanks to her father, Paul Yank, a large-scale sculptor who helped transform Cedarburg,



Photo courtesy of Steve Elkins.



"When she does public art commissions she listens so closely to the voice of the community that her sculpture takes on a personality that is outside her own, that is inclusive of all voices in the community," Turner Carroll says. Photo of Yank's I-40 bridge project courtesy of Robert Peck.



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Wisconsin, into an art center. Karen and her brothers helped their father with his commissions, but she is the only one who followed in his footsteps.

She knew from a young age that she wanted to be an artist, but when she went to college, she eschewed sculpture at first. "I didn't want to compete with my father my whole life."

But then, says Yank, a printmaking instructor asked why she was working in that medium, pointing out that her work was almost sculptural. "It was evident that I think in three dimensions," she says.

It was also evident that she thinks in metal. After her undergraduate success with the steel rods, she moved on to larger, more abstract pieces. During her first graduate school foray at the University of New Mexico, she built a giant maze in the lobby of Popejoy Hall and fabricated pieces that framed different parts of the outside landscape, including the Sandia mountains. But UNM's sculpture department was still nascent, so Yank left for Rutgers University, where one of her instructors, painter Leon Golub, encouraged her to follow her mind's eye and have confidence in her work.

From there, she went on to study at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine and began fabricating smaller pieces representing natural elements like mountains and plants that she hung inside jaw-like constructs. These she shipped back to New Mexico, where she had already decided she would live. "It was talking about the fragility of the world," she says, "I guess I had always been an environmentalist. I was already fighting global warming."

While at Skowhegan, she met another person who would have a profound influence on her life: the renowned painter Agnes Martin, who was an artist in resi-



The two-part Living Landscape, installed at Vista Grande Community Center in Sandia Park. Photos courtesy of Steve Elkins.

dence there. "It was like she saw into my soul," Yank says about Martin's first visit. "She knew exactly what each of my pieces was about."

Martin also gave her focus. "She said, 'Your only problem is that you are so inspired you are almost scattered. You need to hone in if you want to really be successful.'"

It set her work on a different path that was less representational and more abstract. "I wanted to focus on surfaces," Yank says. "I want to draw you in to a point where you don't even know what the pieces is about, but you feel something."

It was her close relationship with Martin that first intrigued Turner Carroll, especially when she learned that Martin considered Yank her only true student. "I began to see how she has taken Agnes Martin's philosophy of art being perfect beauty and the beauty of art being an ex-



pression of love, of joy for the earth and yourself and humanity," Turner Carroll says. "She absorbed it, but it flowered into her own unique expression."

Yank arrived in New Mexico in 1991 and almost immediately began showing her work at galleries in Santa Fe. She met her husband, Rodney Harmon, at the Tamarind Institute, and they bought a fixer-upper home in Sandia Park.

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Her foray into public art projects began when sculptor Evelyn Rosenberg, who saw a large outdoor piece Yank had done for a show at the Linda Durham Gallery in Santa Fe, encouraged her to compete. Initially, Yank had no plans to pursue that kind of work. She had seen her father turn away from public art projects, swearing he would no longer be beholden to others' rules. "But then you realize you have to sell a lot of those little pieces to live," she says.

Yank began landing jobs almost immediately and even beat out Rosenberg for a commission at the New Mexico State Library in Santa Fe. "That was the moment when I said, 'I can do this.'"

Circles figure prominently in her work, a theme that goes back to her time at Rutgers. They are both inspired by and represent a break with Martin, who said that squares and rectangles were the best shapes for evoking an emotional response in the viewer. But, Yank says, "I love circles because they have so much to do with being a woman, with the feminine and Mother Earth."

She is also known for her oversized "XO" sculptures, a pattern that first emerged in a series of sculptures for a 2004 show in New York. The letters symbolized both an embrace for the people of New York—a response to their pain post-9/11—as well as for Martin, who had just passed away (Yank dedicated the show to her.) Turner Carroll says the XO has also come to represent the love the artist has for New Mexico.

Around that time Yank also got a call from the New Mexico Department of Transportation asking her to compete for a bridge project on the I-40/Coors freeway interchange in Albuquerque. She was told she could either compete with the two male artists also in contention or collaborate with them. Yank was open to either. The two men were not. Their inflexibility helped her land the project, a huge opportunity that opened other doors.

Having been taunted as a "girl welder" during her brief stint at UNM, Yank was used to being the only woman in a room. Ironically, that's still true because of how she must now work since taking on huge



Current, commissioned by the City of Boulder, CO, and seen here in the evening, exemplifies the series of "XO" sculptures that make up a well-known part of Yank's oeuvre. Photo courtesy of Karen Yank.

projects like the bridge project. Until then, she did all her own fabricating, drawing, and metal cutting by hand from her home studio and welding shop. But the scale of the bridge project made her realize the necessity of working with fabricators.

The fact that most fabricators are men can present a problem when explaining her vision. "Men think differently, and I really feel like they carry some kind of baggage," she says. "Maybe it's because the person telling them what to do is a woman."

At 58, Yank is bursting with ideas. She is taking a break from large work to focus on smaller, more personal pieces, and she hopes to get more of her aging father's work into museums and into a book. She wants to continue his accomplishments in Cedarburg, but Yank is adapting to the new realities posed by the coronavirus. "This virus will change things and the arts will be notating that," she says. "It will be very important to look at what art is produced in this time."

A book based on Martin's teachings is also in the works, and she hopes to have it ready by 2021, when she will be one of the artists featured in a show at the recently opened New Mexico State University Art Museum, which will focus on women artists of New Mexico, many of them undiscovered or underrated. "It's a spectacular body of work that she's amassed," says Marisa Sage, the museum's director, who likens Yank to minimalist, large-scale artists like Donald Judd. "She's in that pantheon of artists, and I think we need to show her as such." 🐦

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