

Artist Talk: Karla Black

With exhibition curator Jeffrey Grove, The Hoffman Family Senior Curator of Contemporary Art

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Stacey: -- and *Difference?* which is the entrance right behind here. So, we invite you to look at these exhibitions tonight after the talk, so please welcome Jeffrey and Karla.

Jeffrey Grove: Thanks Stacey. Thank you all for being here. I want to introduce Karla Black who is the star of the show this evening, and behind you is one of the two sculptures she created specifically for the Dallas Museum of Art and then the work before you, behind us. And Karla and I are just going to remain in this position and talk about her work and then we're also going to ask questions, open the questions to you.

Karla is happy to answer questions about her process, but I just want to give you a little bit of background of my relationship to Karla's work and how this exhibition came to be. I had followed Karla's work for a number of years. I was introduced to it by her Cologne gallerist, actually, one time and saw a very small work which was a piece of cellophane sort of floating in space with some paint on it. It was actually in an art fair and in the context of this art fair with painting, sculpture, film, and video and there was something about this very light but serious piece of work hanging in the space that sort of riveted my attention.

Over the years, I would see more and more of it and keep wondering who this woman was that would continue to seem to be doing something completely different with rather familiar materials, and I think that that was what the hook was for me trying to understand the materials that she was working with, how she came to really transform them and create sculpture that commands space that commands presence. As I say, it looks like at the same time it could slip away as it's completely announcing and claiming itself.

So, I'm just really interested, maybe, Karla if you could talk a little bit about your relationship to materials and materiality specifically.

Karla Black: Okay, is my microphone on?

Jeffrey Grove: Can you hear?

[00:02:01]

Karla Black: It doesn't seem the same as yours, is it? Yes? Can you hear me? Obviously, I've got a funny accent. That might be a problem, but I'll try to speak slowly. I suppose, I always see that I prioritize material experience over language as a way to learn about and understand the world. So, I think that instead of my work pointing outside of itself through language to meanings, the symbolism and metaphor, it's more that I would see it kind of holds over to as within it.

So, and I think it because it's such, instead, because it is a physical reality in the world rather than say maybe the difference between sort of, well very traditionally, the difference between painting and sculpture is that painting traditionally is like a sort of window onto another world. So, it's an escape from a physical reality and as such it's a sort of optical, cerebral escape. And I think sculpture is, well at least traditionally, is sort of the opposite of that, which means that it's just very real and present. It's here. It's physical and material but that doesn't mean that it can't be a sort of leap for the imagination or an escape. It's just that it does it in an opposite way, so it's like through sort of absorption and the material of physical world in a sort of ridding of oneself in concrete reality.

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So, I suppose that's where I come from because that's how I've always been someone who have to sort of, maybe, find my own way through the world, like very physically, materially and that's the way I've always sort of learned. It's like through sort of making mistakes but in quite a sort of physical way.

Jeffrey Grove: And through the task.

Karla Black: Yeah, and also I'm very much drawn to -- I really worked to begin with that sort of pure desire which is just really about allowing myself to do absolutely what I want to do, at least to begin with. So, I don't question myself with language or anything like, why do you want to use that powder or why do you want to make something pink? I just think, "Oh, I love that powder. I love that color. I love that stuff. What's that?" And then, I just sort of get in amongst it and allow myself to be very experimental.

So, I think I just really love things like powders, paste, oils gels, creams, and then I have a really specific love of color. Which color itself seems like a sort of physical reality to me, like it seems really sort of material. It's something, I sort of, absorb into my body, the same as material.

So, I am attracted to that in a similar way and I have like just sort of view. It's all about tone for me, I suppose. I don't ever use primary colors. So, it's kind of all about the in between, so I like to use the materials as they are and leave them really raw so that they still have a life about them or just a sort of potential so you will sense the potential in them like they're untransformed to a certain extent. I also really like colors that are like that, that are just like in between sort of blue and green or not red but you know.

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I like as much as I also skirt in between mediums, so it's like merely a painting, merely performance art, merely installation art but always ultimately an autonomous sculpture. I just sort of pull it back to that sort of individuated object.

Jeffrey Grove:

And with a work like this, the trace of your hand is actually very much present in everything that you make as opposed to if you walk down the hall and see the Donald Judd or the Michelangelo Pistoletto, they're made of these industrial materials that are very hard and obdura and they could have been cut and produced by another hand and in fact often are, but it's your encounter with the materials that's really central to your practice. It seems distinguishes you from a lot of people working today.

Karla Black:

Yeah, and I suppose that difference is just maybe from one artist to another, from one art work to another, is just the point at which you stop in the process, or how sort of industrialize the process and it just like, often like, the materials are the same or they at least have the same root. I like having root as an origin. Something like plaster should be a hard material, and it's not so definite maybe, really scientifically in its mineral content. So, it's the natural material. It's just calcium, a mineral, as much as metals are. It's just like, obviously, materials are often the same but all just be in a definite state. For me, that's sort of then about the state of the creativity within the material and how much of that creativity you want to present. So, what's important for me when I spoke about...

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I think that possibly, instead of having meanings exactly in language that these works have consequences as physical realities, but one of the consequences would be leaving it as raw as that, really pushes and I really sort of primal chaotic, difficult, messy, creativity into the institutional framework or into the market. So, suppose for me, it's different for everyone, but I suppose I saw a thing that that's what art really is and that's what's really important to me about it, is that the behavior and difficulty.

I just feel like it's not necessarily sealed off, hermitic, transferable object, that I feel like really when you think deep down about what is, it is very much about the drives. It's quite animal and quite sort of primal and I think that I want to be sort of honest about that or at least I like to see that in an art work, often in Museums or art fields or things like that, people maybe want it made a bit easy for them, or it's easy to move about and it's like the reality is that creativity is messy, and difficult, chaotic, and it's a problem that no one really wants. It's really hard to sort of to civilize that or to give it enough of a civilized surface so that it can be presented like in this sort of civilized institutions that we have in the Western world.

Jeffrey Grove: Right, well because museums take things from the context in which they were generally created and transpose them into this epicene environment where they were never really supposed to live.

Karla Black: Often, an object can seem dead in a museum.

Jeffrey Grove: Right.

Karla Black: So, a lot of the time, once an object makes it to a museum often times, and in term of, like its social origin or the origins of its making; it is dead.

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And you're looking at it like it's that sort of a butterfly with a pin through it. And I suppose that's the thing that I'm trying to avoid or I'm trying to get around that. In some way I'm try to keep it alive. Like inside these sort of structures.

Jeffrey Grove: I have to give it to you. Daniel Buren, wrote this sort of tract about this very thing in 1970 where he sort of talked about the thing, the art object is this anthropomorphic object moving into a museum where it then like sort of begins to die and harden and decay because it's no longer alive.

That we have all of these things around us to preserve it, but by preserving, you are killing it. Your work actually rails against that.

Karla Black: Yeah, yeah.

Jeffrey Grove: It's changing as we're standing here as you can see. I mean, it's quite alive. And everyone, just a little background...work like this terrifies registrars in museums because they really do want that thing that you can put on a pedestal and you've seen them down the hall and put the perimeter around it and no one can touch it and no one can really feel it. This work is much more vulnerable to peoples' intention once you put it out there in the world. And, is that something that you intended when you started to make this work?

Karla Black: Yeah, I mean, I suppose it like I feel, I suppose it's really, but the reality is that it's vulnerable and I suppose creativity itself is vulnerable, and then, it's like that is sort of real. I just think that to be, like art work is best when an artist tries to be as courageous as he can about that. It's not about the money or about being able to fit, "Oh, that's okay. It will be okay. That's going to survive," like it's not, even though you want it to. I suppose maybe one of the reasons why I do it is because I think creativity is so much [inaudible]. Like in our generation as well, because there's a lot of all that sort of experimentation from the '60s and '70s, all the sort of performance art and sound art and like anti-form. It's a little bit like...

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There is not so much experimentation going on anymore. If there is, mostly, you don't really get to see it because in our generation the art fair has become king. That is where everybody sees art. It's so institutionalized, so commercialized, that you don't get...it's really hard to sort of keep creativity alive within an art fair. It's not just about creativity itself but sort of about how you are going to have sort of developments within contemporary art or continue to try to make something good and new or have people sort of experiment when what we're sort of concerned about is maybe the money and the transferability of the object. I feel like that's really important and I always just thought, "What if it doesn't work? It doesn't work," but there's more important things that I have to sort of keep trying. I think it's a really hard time for young artists just now, to be experimental, I think.

Jeffrey Grove: Right, because it's also not the way to make it into the institution.

Karla Black: Yes, yes.

Jeffrey Grove: I mean I think that that's why I was interested in your work that it was very committed to its stance and being really strong in that stance and the vagaries of the market could go away or they could exist and that's not what you're work was about.

Karla Black: But I'm still not saying that it's not a compromise, no. It's still a compromise because I think everything is a compromise to a certain degree. It's like with my work, I always think it is part protest, part compromise all at the same time.

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So, I think even to make anything at all is a compromise because sometimes like the joy of it is just like the interaction with the materials and then the creativity itself. And the minute you have to try to maybe finish something or make something, an object, even that in itself is a compromise. All it does take is a week. If you didn't do that then it would just be pure self-indulgence, so it's the difference between, I'm trying to keep all these materials quite raw but I would never just make a sort of mindless gesture as much as I may want to because that's pure self-indulgence.

So, the level of compromise becomes about other people and about society, I suppose. It's like the difference between how much are you doing for yourself to enjoy them and how much, and which of the protest in a way to try to be and to try to be the sort of animal self that you want to be. But then you have to sort of...well, I suppose you have to temper that with compromise in order to make it something that may mean something or have some sort of consequence for other people. For [inaudible], I think probably lots of acts would just be really like mucking about with some stuff.

Jeffrey Grove: Yeah.

Karla Black: And in the studio that can be the best, but, yeah.

Jeffrey Grove: I think it's related to that and you were talking about language, and I quote you in the brochure. There will be a brochure. We're photographing this work now and there will be a brochure issued after the show, but we we're talking, you said that language is useless.

Karla Black: Well, that's a little bit strong.

Jeffrey Grove: A little bit strong, but also the fact that you do use very deliberate language to title your work and it takes it to a different situation once you title it. Can you just talk about how that plays a part in the completion of the work, or as part of the making?

[00:16:09]

Karla Black: I mean there are a lot of contradictions within my work. That is one of them we have tried to see. I think language is kind of primitive inadequate tool, much more abstract as a system than visual art for example. But at the same time, maybe you can tell me maybe you can't, I sort of try my very best with it , but I always feel defeated by it as well. With language there is somewhere that you just can't get. What I tried to do with the work, I think when I make the work to begin with, it sort comes out of my unconscious mind to begin with. So, when I say I just do what I want to do and I don't tempt myself, but very quickly before conscious mind comes in, you move in and out of that and I suppose that's what's happening here is editing.

Also, language sort of coming into the conscious mind even just to say, "What's that you're doing?" Well, I think what I'm trying to do is allow that and then at the end of the process when the work is made, maybe what I try to do is come and name the behavior. So, it's a bit sort of psychoanalytically or something like that. It's a bit like acting out and then thinking of what I have done. What did I do that for? So, I sort of try to name it.

These are a bit different from that because with these two, that's called "Necessity" and that's called "Exactly That", but sometimes I do it. Definitely, what I'm trying to do with that is just do that thing, really sort of make it concrete in reality to see what I try to see here is that it's a material physical reality that you do need any more than that. So, they are really concrete titles. Sometimes, the titles are really behavioral but these aren't.

[00:18:00]

Jeffrey Grove: The idea of something being concrete and actually the title being concrete, just earlier tonight, someone asked the question--they were asking us to explain, okay, how this would live in the Museum, let's say if we acquire it. We've talked about that and someone said, "Would it always be pink?" I said, "Of course, it would always be pink because that's the piece." And then, they said, "Well, this would go away but it

would be recreated,” and they saw it as sort of like conceptual art, there's a certificate. And I said, “I don't know the answer to that but I don't think so,” I mean in a way like you issue instructions for something but it's not a conceptualist construction of the work.

Karla Black:

Yeah, because there's a lot of things about my work that are just practical necessities, so I just think I'm really practical and the work is really practical. It's just like there are sculptural problems that you have to try to solve. There are lots of different categories of my work so some of it is transferable. You know, when I make standing sculptures that you put in a cake mix, it's all the same materials, but some things are more solid than others. This for example is a totally permanent piece of work and it just comes apart in sections and then you put it back up in sections that always stay the same. For this, you just keep the bit in the middle and everything else in the installation just gets thrown away, but it's almost like sort of baking a cake or something.

There's sort of a recipe for how to make the powder, yeah, because I've done it. So, I've done it once. Once I've done it once and it's written down, I knew what the mix of white plaster powder to red powder or pink is to get that color and it's a recipe. There are the dimensions of how big it is. It's just really easy to put it up, so yeah. I suppose it's just not conceptual art because all the differences that the directions or the contracts and things that we have aren't part of the work.

[00:20:04]

So, it's only a practical necessity to be able to make something happen again to make it live again and then when it does, it becomes that physical material reality, sort of abstract aesthetic art with more of a relationship to modernist aesthetic painting or Abstract Expressionism rather than to have another relationship to conceptual.

Jeffrey Grove:

And I just want to because I just noticed something. The light changed, it got a little darker and now this work for instance is lit mostly artificially but you have to come back during the day because when there is day light outside and then at a certain time at the day when the sun begins to come through it, it becomes a completely different piece. So again, unlike the wonderful Pistoletto “Infinity Cube” that sits there and it is the same thing behaving itself in a certain way.

Karla Black:

Yeah, yeah.

Jeffrey Grove: I describe this as using the architecture of the space as a component in the sculpture.

Karla Black: Yeah.

Jeffrey Grove: Both wittingly and unwittingly uses nature as component in a different way.

Karla Black: Yeah, because you get the direct sunlight comes in and then it just really sparkles to get all the shadows on the floor and it's really at its best about three o'clock in the afternoon, so.

Jeffrey Grove: We'll, would you all come back free one day, like at three o'clock?

Karla Black: It's quite a commitment.

Jeffrey Grove: I know. I want to open up the floor to questions, yes?

Male: I absolutely love this piece. Thank you for providing space [?]. And you are right, a lot of times, in museums you've got the sterile walls and you got open spaces where everything should be shoved in the [inaudible] The other thing I really loved about this is you just can't compartmentalize it. You can't buy it and put it in your house and put it in a little corner where you put your [inaudible]. Every once in awhile you pull it out and say, "It's a [inaudible]." My question would be for a piece like this, did you come here thinking that this was the place where you're going to put this or did you come here scoping out the space and looking for a functional zone that you can essentially transfer or recreate?

[00:22:07]

Karla Black: No, I did know that this would be the space that I would have, so I was allocated this corridor space, yes, and this room and I think I did see or I really wanted to do something with the window. This is part of the Concentrations, which concentrates on sort of younger or emerging artists with a small project show. So, does it always involve the corridor?

Jeffrey Grove: No, there has never been anything here before.

Karla Black: Yeah, so I think I just said I really love that window when I knew it would be in that space and then I purposefully made that for the window. All of the bulk of it, that main bit, it was all made at home in Glasgow in sections and then all painted at home and then put up and then I made

all of these, everything. Like the bottom sections, I made that all here. Just [inaudible], but yeah, I sort of did that just to make something quite specifically for a space when I come.

Male: You didn't bring it over here on carry on, I would imagine.

Karla Black: No, it was in a crate.

Jeffrey Grove: The biggest crate that we've ever seen in our lives.

Karla Black: A crate factory made it. It's like, yeah.

Jeffrey Grove: Karla had an assistant who came to help and when they saw the crates they were a little bit shocked.

Karla Black: Someone measured it wrong. I think the shippers measured it wrong. It was in a gigantic wooden and it's like the lightest thing ever, you know. It could just have been in a soft-wrap box.

Jeffrey Grove: Yeah, as I said I've been following Karla's work for a while and actually when I went to see her in Glasgow, it was January. I think it was dark and about three o'clock that day and we were upstairs in a bedroom. I think you were using it as a studio and I think you were experimenting with some --

Karla Black: I was making cellophane works for a show at [inaudible].

Jeffrey Grove: Yeah and even now it was dark outside and the windows were closed and there was piece over here and it was in a room that had windows and I just immediately thought of all the light in our Museum and it's one of the great things about the architecture and so I suggested this as a possibility and Karla really went for it.

[00:24:12]

Karla Black: Yeah, and I've always wanted to try to have a really big amount of daylight on some because I use cellophane a lot and like you can light it, and really make it sparkle but I've noticed that the best it ever looks is outside. When I've been transferring from my studio into a van, the sunshine and all that and I want to try to recreate that and this is like the most amount of daylight I've ever been able to get. Because it's a direct sunlight, I think that's really good, yeah.

Female: And the piece doesn't disintegrate with direct sunlight which is really, really great.

Karla Black: No, no. Yeah.

Female: As opposed to a lot of work.

Karla Black: Yeah, yeah.

Jeffrey Grove: Frances, you had a question?

Frances: Yeah, Karla Are those your fingerprints? (Karla: Yeah) So what about the fact that if you didn't take that down and put it up, you wouldn't have your finger prints anymore? You have a recipe for where to touch it?

Karla Black: Yeah, I mean, maybe the thing is like if I was around, I would always do the installation. I would do it again but I don't necessarily mind if it's someone else's fingerprint because I think it's just fingerprints. I think it would be okay, yeah.

Frances: But it's kind of cool to know that it is your fingerprints

Karla Black: Yeah.

Frances: It's like the ultimate signature. It is your finger, so. I also understand your premise, so that if you got [inaudible].

Karla Black: Yeah, and that is a total compromise, because it's just like, well, for me, I think that obviously. I think ideally, I would like it to be mine and I would like to just sort of go everywhere. When there's a new installation, I would always like to do it and then because it's not possible, it's really difficult. Like over recent years, the work, it's become a bit more successful.

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There have been more shows and you can't go everywhere. It has been something that I have been really torn about, and I thought, "Well, your choice is either that it doesn't exist anymore, it can't exist at all." So, it's like I would rather it did exist, but it's still difficult.

Female: That's one of those compromises.

Karla Black: Yeah.

Stacey: But that tape, Is it sticky on both sides --

Karla Black: Well, it could be. I mean it could be but because its cello tape, I think that it'd be interesting to see what it looks like. It's crystal clear cello tape so it doesn't yellow as quickly. It doesn't yellow as quickly as normal cello tape, but I think that it will yellow and I think that bothers me more.

Jeffrey Grove: We are going to see much dust it picks up in six months.

Karla Black: If it looks okay, we could keep it. It's another one of those things that you have to wait and see like -- yeah.

Female: I'm thinking about dusting the areas.

Karla Black: Yeah, that's one thing we have to tolerate because there is a way to -- the cellophane attracts a bit of dust. It's okay and you just leave it. You know that's just natural and it becomes like that. The corridor will attract some dust and some little bits of dust, they're okay, we just leave it. The one thing that happens over a really long period is you tend to get dust balls, so what you do with that is--

Jeffrey Grove: Not in our Museum!

Karla Black: Yeah, but what you do is you just get a long stick of bamboo or whatever. Stick a piece of cello tape on the end of it and fish, so then, it comes out. You can also do that with insects. Sometimes insects die and then you can do that and it doesn't really leave a mark so it's great.

Jeffrey Grove: Again, no insects in the Museum. Is there another question? Yes sir?

Male: Maybe I missed it; I came in a little late...Why pink?

[00:27:58]

Karla Black: Well, I just said mainly because I really love that color and I was saying that I always just try to work out of my own desire for what I want to do and what I really like. Mainly, it's the tone of the colors that really interest me the most. So, the in-between colors are the colors that I use or that I like, so it's like even with this, if it's green or yellow, or if it's blue or if it would be red, for example, so I take the primary colors and I sort of dilute them right down to the point where they just sort of -- well, not like sort of, almost a color or only just the color sometimes to get really,

really pale. I just really love -- it's not pastels inside because I feel like it's more high key than that. It's like a sort of high key pastel that it has brightness but all the colors I go for are like pink, blue, green, yellow, a sort of peach, things that are just like in between.

Jeffrey Grove: I just wondered because you were talking about almost a certain color and you've also describe your sculpture as almost an object?

Karla Black: Yeah, yeah.

Jeffrey Grove: What does that mean in your articulation of it?

Karla Black: Yeah, I think it's like that thing about trying to sort of retain the potential. It's like the beginning of life but it's when I sort of find things, maybe most interesting where there's still neither quite one thing nor another. So to me, I would have to say that's how I sort of judge it. Is it almost sculpture, is it only just a sculpture who [inaudible], because I think if it's too much of a solid sculpture, I mean I love all sculpture, but just for me, my sculpture, that's not that interesting to me.

[00:30:07]

I think that for that reason is that it retains its sort of like experimental nature, and it has an openness and a potential where you don't really close off. So, I feel like, with the color and the material, everybody sort of knows that they could touch that material that it would move. And just this sort of the feeling of that, or the knowledge of that, that it isn't quite a solid finished thing that it's just almost certainly just that it could be you that you could move that all around even though the point is it's in a museum you're not supposed to do that. Just the impetus towards physical response that that brings, the openness that allows other people into that, even as it transforms itself from a sort of bodily urge to...through the thwarting of it by the context, because you know you not supposed to do that.

It becomes a sort of cerebral experience of that, what you know with that, sort of bodily or it's just like that to keep it open, to keep it unfinished. I think I have a sense that I feel like I'm not. I don't mean this in a negative way, thought it seems it's negative at all, but nothing is ever good enough to be finished. Maybe that's why I think it's sort of important that it's part of -- I don't think these things exist in isolation you see like this but I think my whole body of work, everything has a relation to each other and it's sort of ongoing and it's sort of open and it's unfinished and it's trying to over time, progress and be better.

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So, I really purposefully don't shut it down if you know what I mean.

Jeffrey Grove: You say it more eloquently than anyone else could. Is there one more question?

Male: Did you do all of these --

Karla Black: Yeah, but --

Male: -- or you have assistants?

Karla Black: I had assistants to help put them up, but yeah, I make it all.

Male: You have a construction.

Karla Black: Yeah, yeah. My two assistants, they work with the people in the museum and then they have a sky jack. Is that what you call it? They just put. I didn't put all that up because the up in sections. I just physically did all this stuff at the bottom in the Museum but the rest was all done at home before over a long quite a long period of time, so that's [inaudible].

Male: Wow, it's awesome, very good.

Jeffrey Grove: Okay, let's go. It's going to get really noisy in a minute, so we're going to conclude this talk. Thank you all for coming. We'll be here for a few minutes. I'm sure everyone is going to run up and want to talk to Karla, so pace yourselves; pace, Karla. Thank you for coming and remember the museum is up until midnight. There's a lot to do and explore all of the exhibitions. And thank you for coming. And thank you, Karla, for coming.

00:33:33