

# Gary Kuehn

## YOU KNOW, YOU'RE NOT AS FREE AS YOU THINK YOU ARE

By Cindy Hinant

*This is the second installment in Cindy Hinant's series of interviews with Gary Kuehn.*

WHEN I VISITED Gary Kuehn's summer home in Truro last year, his studio space had exploded. The walls of the house were covered with a new series of energetic works on paper that spilled into every room. I was struck by how these drawings and paintings revealed so much of Kuehn's thinking process. The 150 works he produced—a selection will be on view this summer in the exhibition *Alternative Desires* at Gaa Gallery in Provincetown—comprise a rich and diverse investigative series featuring geometric forms that have been distorted by paint drips and graphite gestures.

This untitled series signals a new direction for Kuehn, while succinctly summarizing one of the primary concerns that the artist has been addressing throughout his long and varied career: the metaphorical implications of freedom and boundaries, while exploring the inherent qualities of materials and the formal and psychological tension between disparate forms. This conceptual approach to material made him a significant figure in the post-minimal and process art movements of the '60s and continues to inspire his work today.

Over the past seven years, I have worked with Kuehn as his archivist and studio manager and spent a few weeks each summer at the artist's summer home on Slough Pond, which he shares with his wife, the writer Suzanne McConnell. During these visits, I've recorded a series of conversations with Kuehn about his work and life. The following interview is a second installment in a series of dialogues based on edited transcripts from these talks.



Portrait of the artist, 2017

PHOTO BY CINDY HINANT

**CINDY HINANT:** As a Rutgers University student in the early '60s, you were immersed in the Fluxus movement, attending happenings with Allan Kaprow and La Monte Young. How did this influence your work?

**GARY KUEHN:** It was important for me because I found out what I didn't want to do. In 1963 I was invited to perform in the Yam Festival at the Hardware Poets Playhouse in New York. I had concocted this performance ritual where a group of my female classmates were in the

space pushing a huge yellow ball around, which was like a sun, and when it stopped they took turns drilling holes in the floor to plant garishly painted plaster flowers. It was choreographed to the alternating sounds of a bathtub filling, and a dopey pop song from the time, "Sally Go 'Round the Roses." The women wore nightgowns over balloons filled with red paint, which they popped with a pin at random moments—and I should mention that I had turned on a lawn sprinkler that swept back and forth across



Installation view of 1960s sculptures in Gary Kuehn: *Between Sex and Geometry*, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, 2014 © Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein

PHOTO BY STEFAN ALTENBURGER



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*Black Painting*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 24 by 24 inches

the performance space. It was so wacky. And while I was pleased to have an engaged and interesting audience that included Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, and Kaprow, I was terrified at how psychologically revealing the performance turned out to be.

**CH:** You actually brought a sprinkler inside?

**GK:** Yes, I hooked it up to a faucet knowing that the water mixed with the paint would cover the floor in an interesting way. The worst part was that the performance space was on the second floor—it was really a mess. I can't imagine what the floor below looked like afterwards. The women had red paint running down their bodies, the paint on the flowers began to run, and there were pools of water on the floor. I was mortified. I vowed that I would never do anything like that again, something that I didn't have complete control over.

**CH:** I can see how the complete freedom offered by Fluxus, with no parameters or limits, would give you nothing to push against.

**GK:** From the very beginning, I was weaned on the avant-garde and the idea of pushing the limits of what art could be, as it was clear to all of us that Modernism was being played out. The art and life question as posited by Kaprow and Rauschenberg was the essential concern of the artists I was around in the early '60s. It was in this environment that I started juxtaposing ideas and materials from everyday life with conventional painting and sculpture and forcing them into a relationship.

**CH:** Your everyday life at the time was supported by union ironwork and roofing. How did this influence your approach to materials?

**GK:** In my experience as a construction worker,

I became aware of the expressive and metaphoric potential of construction materials. Even the way materials were stacked on job sites interested me—there would be piles of geometric materials stacked haphazardly, which I saw as a metaphor for the line between order and chaos. *Tar Piece* (1967) is one work that came out of my day-to-day experience as a roofer. Although it was conceived a priori, the geometric forms sagged and behaved like a slab of tar would behave on a hot summer day.

**CH:** You've stated that you want to "set up situations where the work would make itself." How do you see your role as the artist within these parameters?

**GK:** I think that it's important for any artist to have a working method that can be applied to

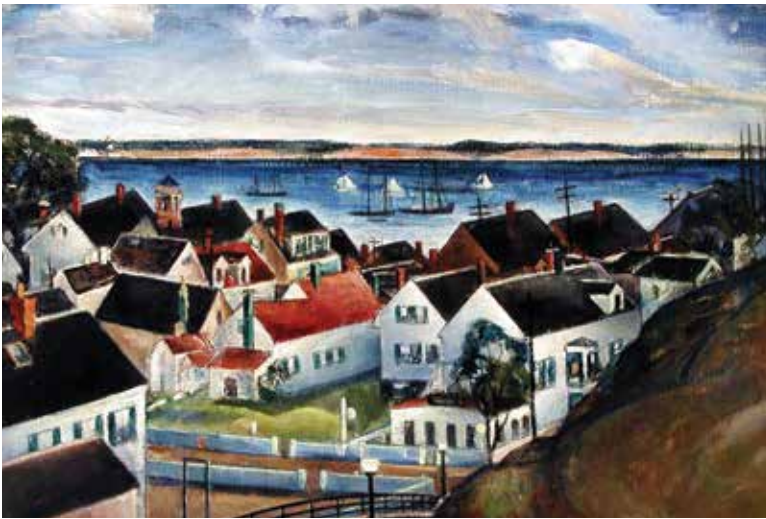
the cultural moment. Almost all of my work is dialectical; positing something, selecting something, then turning around and looking for its opposite or antithesis and then letting the energy of the work come from the play between the two. I would say that I'm playing both sides. I set the trap and then fall into it and there is nothing else to do but follow the rules. In a psychological way, there is a balance between dominance and submission or surrender. There's something very satisfying about being both the perpetrator and the victim in the same work—it lends itself to a complete experience. Let's say it's a supposed crime. I can't be implicated because I was just seeing the whole event from a distance—I wasn't the agent of squeezing or bending, I was just watching it in a godlike way. By distancing myself from the decision-making process, I become, in effect, the instigator or "unmoved mover," allowing inherently expressive materials and techniques to assert themselves.

**CH:** Your *Black Paintings* series (1969–present) is a body of work in which you force shapes to fit within a predetermined format. In this series, organic fluid shapes are distorted and pressed against the edge of the picture plane. This seems to relate to your disillusionment with the Fluxus movement and asserts your interest in working within rather than outside "the box." The *Black Paintings* focus on the painting as a container or as a trap, much like the gesture pieces, in which the edge of the painting was the edge of the world.

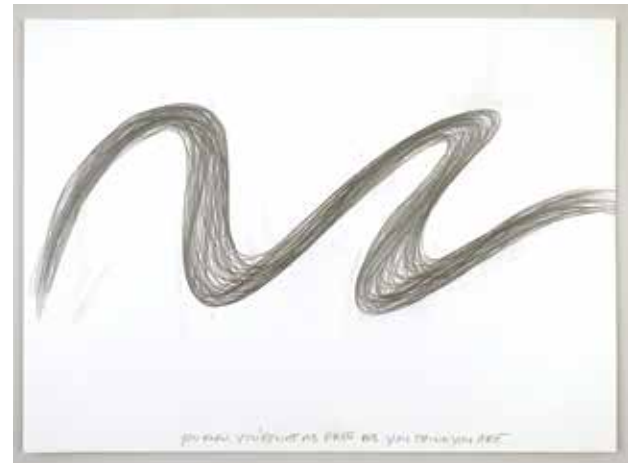
**GK:** Early on I decided that one of the toughest things to do is to take on art in a larger sense, to take on the challenge of doing art that's unmistakable and takes on the whole of art history. If you can do something like that, you have really done something. Here, you are at the very center of the idea of art, which gets more dissipated the more you get away from the center, which of course is always shifting. When I was in school, students tried, almost as a game, to get as far away as they could from the center as possible. I was skeptical of this approach, and I think that's



*Tar Piece*, 1967, wood and tar, 25½ by 216 by 72 inches (destroyed) COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Untitled, 2014, graphite and coffee on canvas, 24 by 36 inches COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



You Know, You're Not as Free as You Think You Are, 2017, graphite on paper, 22 by 30 inches

PHOTOS BY CINDY HINANT

why I started painting; it seemed to be the most controlled thing to do.

Why are the paintings black? I wanted a formal neutrality, and I was sensitive to the implications of color. At a base level, I was thinking about what is a painting, what's a canvas, what's a given format, and I began to consider the stretched canvas as a container. I had an aversion to composition and design, and so developed a procedural approach to painting. I started filling the space with flexible circles, which distorted and adjusted to each other until the space was filled. In the early works, gravity

was a major organizational device and would determine how the shapes settled.

**CH:** So, essentially you built a wooden box around the canvas, attached shapes made from strips of stainless steel (or paper in the earliest versions), and then poured paint into the resulting forms. This process is very similar to how you would pour plaster to make your *Melt Pieces* (1963–70). What's different or the same about your approach to material in the *Black Paintings*?

**GK:** The *Black Paintings* are in essence an investigation of paint as a material with physical properties in much the same way that I exploit construction materials for their intrinsic expressive properties. Acrylic has a physicality that I like, and the whole procedure of making these is, I think, evident and honest to the nature of the material. When I use construction materials, found objects, and materials from other trade professions, these materials come with their own baggage, which tends to complicate the works. In this series, I wanted to narrow down the essence of these issues of compression, distortion, and entrapment.

**CH:** Another contradiction in your work is the way you limit free forms by creating boundaries. *You Know, You're Not As Free As You Think You Are* (2017) appears to be a group of wild graphite squiggles until you realize that the hard edge of the form was created by a stencil. Can you explain this desire to limit expression?

**GK:** Until I started the *Gesture Project* (1964–present), I had a fear of expression, or fear of expressiveness. If I needed a particular line, I would make a line and then make a stencil of the line and then draw the line again by using the stencil. I wanted to make a series that confined all of the options and the possibilities of a gesture on a piece of paper. To that end, I began to use stencils as a frame that blocked the gesture, so that if I was thrashing around with a pencil, the edge of the rectangular stencil became evident. The line would hit the edge of the world and have to bounce back to the center of the space, sort of like a billiard ball.

**CH:** You set up situations where mistakes are inevitable and certain elements are left to chance. Your stencil drawings, with their regular measured lines, could have a sterile quality, but you insist on imperfection; the graphite smears or a cup of coffee gets spilled, and the works refuse to submit to the authority of the stencil.

**GK:** The graphite smears, the pencil jumps, you don't always follow the stencil exactly. I didn't like the idea of working on something for hours and then one pencil slip would destroy the piece. I was comfortable with the little blips and mistakes, keeping it ordinary and signifying that the works were not about purity or precision. There were probably mechanical ways to do what I did, but I liked the vitality and fallibility of it.

Avoiding perfection is an idea that I picked up from Claes Oldenburg, who in 1964 exhibited his work *Bedroom Ensemble* (1963) at the Sidney Janis Gallery. Richard Artschwager had fabricated the sculpture installation, and there were some nicks or blemishes in the Formica, which needed to be repaired. Oldenburg was pretty upset and said to me in effect, 'See, this is what happens when you have this purity. The tyranny of it really gets you in the end—you become a victim of your own precepts.' I took this observation to heart; it gave allowance for less-than-perfect craftsmanship, for slips and mistakes, and over-painting, and all that. I didn't want to be identified with a pristine way of working, so oftentimes the coffee spots are deliberate. While working on a piece, I like to think that there is no difference between the drawing and myself. I try to keep the working process spontaneous and ordinary. ❏

*CINDY HINANT is an artist and writer based in New York whose work is concerned with postfeminist representations of gender and the utopic aspirations of Minimalism. Her work has been exhibited at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, the Egyptian Modern Art Museum, the Lenbachhaus Munich, and the Palais de Tokyo. In 2013, she curated the exhibition Gary Kuehn: Postures at the Joe Sheftel Gallery, and in 2014 she contributed an essay to Kuehn's retrospective exhibition catalogue for the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein.*

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