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September 14, 2018

Artist Spotlight: Kelly Carámbula



Kelly

Carámbula in her SF studio.

Balance is something we all struggle with. Between work, family, and other commitments, taking time to ourselves can easily come in last. With two small children, artist **Kelly Carámbula** is no stranger to navigating motherhood, work, and staying creative. Based in San Francisco, Kelly's beautiful collage work teeters between the simple and the complex. Her new show, *A Year of Color & Form*, features work she's created over the past year that leaves the viewer with a deeper appreciation for looking closer, longer, and from a different perspective. Kelly sat down with Kayla and Giselle to talk about how she balances motherhood, running her own business, and what projects she has in store for the future.

Kayla: You earned your BFA in graphic design from Western Michigan University. Although your work is not digital these days, I can tell from your use of simplistic forms and clean lines that graphic design has influenced your style. How did you make the transition from digital to traditional media?

Kelly Carámbula: From a young age, I've always loved making things with my hands. Growing up, I would paint my mom's Avon boxes and old furniture she'd pick up at garage sales—plus I sewed and dabbled in other crafts, so I feel like using my hands to make things is part of my DNA. It wasn't until I was a sophomore in college that I realized that I could actually use my love of creating art and make a career out of it via graphic design. So I switched to digital media and worked solely on the computer for over 10 years.

I slowly began doing less design after having kids until it became too much of a drag—I felt like every time I opened my computer it was only to answer emails. To be honest—I was overwhelmed by life as a mother and I needed a creative outlet that required very little initial effort. Enter collage.



Various collage pieces by Kelly.

Kayla: What does it mean to you to be creative? How do you stay motivated despite having other obligations and roles you play in your life? For so many creatives, I think it's hard to carve out time to explore all the ideas we have, and thus, we end up doing nothing at all and becoming discouraged.

KC: To me—especially over the past couple of years—my creativity is a necessity. When I don't get time to make, to explore ideas, I feel it in my mind and my body. So I'm very intentional with my time and make sure that I carve out time every day to make something or see art or read. It took a lot of work on my end to get to this point where I feel strong enough to say that and stand up for my needs as an artist and mother. But luckily I have a very supportive husband who understands how important this is.



Carámbula in her SF studio (left), Paper collage piece (right)

Giselle: How are you juggling your art practice and motherhood?

KC: Sometimes I feel like I'm on top of it and good at both and other days I feel like I'm failing—as a mother, as an artist, and sometimes both. I think that's called motherhood, ha!

After five years as a mother to a special needs child, I've finally realized that it's ok to ask for help and in fact—pile on as much help as I can possibly get. For so long, I felt like I could do it all on my own and that my daughter needed me (specifically) at every appointment she goes to, but I'm letting go of that mindset and I think it's good for both of us. Mama doesn't have to do everything. Mama has interests. Mama's good at things other than being a mama. After having my second child two and a half years ago and hitting a real low creatively—I realized that this is not how I wanted my girls to see me. Instead, I want them to remember me during their childhood as someone who had fun with them but also had her own interests and life. Since then, I've made a real effort to be that person.



Inside Kelly's studio featuring handmade planters and collages.

Kayla: You used to publish and design *Remedy Quarterly*, a magazine dedicated to food memories and recipes. How did you get involved in that? Was food photography one of your areas of interest?

KC: I have to say, that feels like a lifetime ago. I started a food blog, eatmakeread.com, after I moved to Brooklyn and realized that being a picky eater wasn't the way I wanted to live my life. I discovered a passion for food—exploring markets, trying new restaurants, and making new recipes. It was a blast and led to many exciting opportunities, one of them being the creation of my magazine, *Remedy Quarterly*.

The idea behind *Remedy Quarterly* was to share cherished recipes—ones that had a story behind them—and to share that connection with our readers. A major inspiration behind both the idea and the form factor was a book my mom made for me. Sadly, she passed away when I was in college, but just before she died, she made me a little book filled with recipes—my favorites, but also her favorites and dishes that were shared at family events. It is one of my most treasured items and when I look at it, I feel connected to her. I think she knew that I would get over my picky phase, but I'm not sure she could've ever imagined how much that little book would influence my life.

Once I began the magazine and my partners decided they no longer had time to take it on (this was Issue 2—we had 22 issues), I took on all aspects of the magazine including art direction, design,

photography, illustration, shipping, and a bit of writing. It was bonkers and the learning curve was steep. I had a bit of experience with food photography from my blog, but I wanted to make sure that it wasn't all food photography, so about half of the stories were illustrated rather than photographed. I love, love, love cookbooks from the 50's and 60's—many of them include very few photographs and instead include amazing two-color illustrations. Stylistically, I wanted Remedy to feel a bit nostalgic like that rather than the traditional, perfectly styled and photo-centric food magazines.



Wheel-

thrown pottery by Kelly.

Giselle: In a recent conversation that we had, you mentioned that #100daysofcolorandform became an unintended catalyst for your renewed creative passion that you are currently experiencing. Can you tell us more about what that is, how that project came about, and what it means to you?

KC: The #100dayproject is an amazing idea first introduced by Michael Beirut of Pentagram, but really driven forward by Elle Luna and Lindsay Jean Thomas. Basically, you chose an idea and you work on it for 100 days.

I was in a creative slump—I had two kids (ages 1 and 4) whom I stayed home with, had just designed and renovated our house which took way more out of me than I expected, I no longer felt inspired to create my magazine—which had been my lifeline to any sort of professional life, and just felt lost. A friend posted about the 100 day project and something about it called out to me. So as you may have guessed, I chose #100daysofcolorandform. I wanted to do something open-ended but I was also really interested in collage. I'd dabbled with it a little after having my first child, and I loved how graphic it was but required so little. As soon as I started the project, I felt this burst of creative energy that I hadn't felt in years. I had ideas! I had thoughts that didn't involve scheduling or children! And, people were responding positively to my work when I posted it online. It felt incredible and it was then that I saw a path forward.

I started working during my kid's nap time, for something like 15 minutes. But then I just kept taking more and more time—I found little bits of unused time and made art. It was incredible to see and feel the creative growth. I knew that this was the path that I wanted to take—to make things—and for the first time in my adult life, I decided to just do that. To build a creative practice where I made art every day for no reason other than to explore.



Various

ceramic pieces by Kelly.

Giselle: I was in awe watching you develop your ceramic wheel throwing practice on Instagram. From what I know, you were a beginner when you started at Pinckney Clay Studios, but in what seemed to me like a very fast time, you were throwing awesome looking pots and they started becoming complicated fast. How was that experience for you? Do you think you are a natural?

KC: Thank you! I started taking classes at Pinckney Clay Studios (it's right next to my daughter's therapy studio—I think it was meant to be) when she first opened her doors in June 2017. I took a hand building class, then a wheel class (side note, I may have shed a tear after my first wheel class because it seemed too hard) and have been hooked since then. I'm now a member and work in the studio a few afternoons a week.

I love the tangibility of clay and how clearly you can see the process and progress evolve. Clay is not an easy medium—there are so many opportunities for failure (making, firing, glazing, etc), but that's one thing that I like about it. I can let go of my controlling tendencies and just roll with it. In fact, some of my favorite pieces have come from failures.

As a bonus, I absolutely love having a creative space to go and work and be near other people. I'm pretty self-driven, but I like being in a space where other people are making things and honestly, just

getting out of the house.



Ceramic

pieces by Kelly.

Kayla: What makes you go back and forth from functional clay pieces to abstract clay pieces?
How does that mix influence your creativity?

KC: When I started working with clay I primarily made functional pieces. I could look around my house and think “Oh, I’d like a mug” or a flower pot or something to that effect. But there’s only so much of that I can do without getting bored.

About six months into working with clay, I realized that I didn’t want to lock myself into making things to sell. Because of my magazine work and dealing with the retail world, I automatically started thinking in terms of selling my wares and making a line of ceramics that I could sell to shops, but when I stepped back, I realized I actually didn’t want to do that. I wanted to make things for the sake of making things. So once I took that pressure off of myself, it really opened the door to trying non-functional work, like my clay collages, tabletop sculptures, and larger pots. That doesn’t mean that I don’t still make functional pieces, but it frees me up from having to do one thing all the time.



At work in her studio.

Kayla: Your collage pieces are often shape and patterned based with colorful layers and textures. When you start a piece, do you often have an end result in mind, or do you allow the piece to direct your next move?

KC: One of the things I love about creating my collage work is that it lets me get out of my head—it's therapeutic in a way. I rarely go in with a preconceived idea of what I'm going to make. I turn my music on, get my scissors and glue, and roll with it. It's really an opportunity to let go and follow my intuition. My clay collages allow for additional levels of experimentation where I can incorporate unexpected dimension and hidden perspectives within each piece which provides a challenge that I truly enjoy.



Ceramic 3D collage in the works.

Kayla: How would you describe your work to those that have yet to see it?

KC: My work is a study of color and form, using primarily paper and clay (separately). It's abstract, colorful, geometric, and often incorporates little surprises to keep you on your toes.

Kayla: Are there any particular pieces or projects that you've worked on that you feel especially proud of?

KC: Yes, some pieces, like “Launch” (which is what my installation is based on) have deep meaning to me. I use what I call the “launch” shape (it looks a bit like a periscope) in many of my collages because it symbolizes moving up and forward while not always knowing what’s ahead. That specific piece was the last collage I created as part of the “year of color and form”. Seeing it reminds me of all that I’ve done and that I always want to move forward.

I'm also proud of my larger pots. I spent a lot of time sitting at the pottery wheel—failing often— but trying over and over to push myself to make something that brought me joy. There is something magical about pulling something out of the glaze firing and thinking “Wow, I made that”.



Carámbula.

Kayla: Do you have any plans for future projects that you'd like to share?

KC: I'll be debuting my first large-scale installation at this show, which I've been wanting to do for a while now. I'm excited to explore scale and ideally find a space to show more of this type of work in the coming year.

Be sure to catch Kelly's show, *A Year of Color & Form*, opening at Rare Device Divisadero on **Friday, September 21st from 6-9 p.m.** The show runs through November 5th.

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