



Karin Birch: Sailing Toward the Other Shore



SLOWLY, KARIN BIRCH HAS BEEN removing layers of old wallpaper from the living-room ceiling of her 110-year-old Brunswick, Maryland, home. It's physically demanding work, and she's far from done.

Upstairs in her studio, Birch has been diligently working on another challenging transformation—her latest body of artwork, titled, appropriately enough, *Transition*. For the forty-four-year-old artist, these intimate canvases of beads and embroidery are a remedy for radical life changes. Two years ago, the artist's husband died after a long battle with multiple sclerosis. A painter whom Birch met at the Corcoran School of Art, Christopher Sugarman was, she says, her soul mate.

The first symptoms of the disease occurred six months into their marriage. For almost two decades, both artists stayed productive. Even while bedridden in the living room, looking at that old wallpaper, Sugarman managed to draw. During the six months before and after his death, however, Birch was unable to make or sell any art. The ensu-

ing financial setback was compounded with an emotional one, when Birch's grown daughter decided to leave home.

It was this daughter who had years ago led Birch to fiber art. Having previously made large-scale paintings and handcrafted jewelry (both of which left hazards for a wandering toddler), Birch was embroidering baby clothes when she realized that embroidery could be used to make art. The medium was safe and inexpensive and allowed for more spontaneity—a natural fit.

LEFT: Saint Undelivered, 2004; hand embroidery, hand-stitched seed beads and acrylic paint on linen; 18" x 20".

RIGHT: Leaving, 2003; hand embroidery and acrylic paint on linen; 13" x 14".

*Photos of work: Karin Birch.
Photo of artist: Krim El Ouazani*

To be exhibited at Philadelphia's Snyderman-Works Galleries February 4–March 15, *Transition* documents Birch's artistic journey through grieving, one which has been cathartic for her. As with the living-room wallpaper, in her work she carefully peels away layers of emotion with meditative focus. Paradoxically, this work boasts the brightest color palette the artist has ever used. To Birch, however, the art is neither happy nor sad. It is simply what she must do: a rough swell she must navigate.

How fitting, then, that an abstracted boat is a recurring leitmotif. Although she is not a practicing Buddhist, Birch resembles the Eastern concept of the "stream-enterer" (one who has reached the first stage of spiritual development). She dives into currents of symbolism that she may not yet fully understand in the belief that it will lead to enlightenment.

Her process is an act of prayer; the results are like paintings. Melding abstract expressionism that suggests Helen Frankenthaler and Mark Rothko with embroidery and beads, Birch is able to envision things she has never seen before. Like the art of Arthur Dove, which abstracts nature down to its lyrical essence, Birch's art depicts not outer appearance but inner reality.

About Birch's marriage, someone once observed that she "must be a saint." For the artist, that painful comment elicits feelings of failure. These emotions come to the fore in *Saint Undelivered*, a composition that begins with a red beaded halo. Like the pretend penmanship of a preschooler, a loopy wave pattern dances between two boats, one blue, one yellow. For Birch, this "writing" expresses the ineffability of emotional truth. The boats, "vessels of comfort" for Birch, sail

in opposite directions, surrounded by buffers of French knots. Without passengers, they are voids, portals to the Buddhist concept of the other shore, where mindful monks find salvation. But the other shore is here in the art, a place of no birth, no death, and no suffering.

For Birch, the boats navigate holy water, symbols of the truth that will eventually liberate her soul. ●

ABOVE: Shape Shifting (with detail at right), 2002; hand embroidery, hand-stitched seed beads, and acrylic paint on linen; 20" x 22".

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