

# Turning the Self into a Series:

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## KAREN KAAPCKE'S SELF-PORTRAIT DRAWINGS

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As an art form, self-portraits are a distinct subgroup within portraiture, most notably because the model and the artist are one and the same. This rather obvious fact may be one of the reasons that successful self-portraits can depict more than just external appearances. In fact, the best ones, such as the late self-portraits of Rembrandt (1606-1669) or many by Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), seem to convey a particular honesty about the inner spirit or emotional state of the subject that simply doesn't seem possible in portraits.

It's something the German expressionist Max Beckmann (1884-1950), another great self-portraitist, may have been alluding to in his letter to a woman painter in 1948: "The important thing is first of all to have a real love for the visible world that lies outside ourselves as well as to know the deep secret of what goes on within ourselves. For the visible world in combination with our inner selves provides the realm where we may seek infinitely for the individuality of our own souls. In the best art this search has always existed."

This aesthetic quest for a unique form of sincere expression is something New York City artist and teacher Karen Kaapcke has been tenaciously striving for over the past year, beginning on her 50th birthday, Sept. 27, 2012. During this time, she has been hard at work on a project she calls *Drawing 50*, in which she has attempted to draw or sketch at least one self-portrait every day until her 51st birthday.

In other words, she is compiling a daily account of her life... in pictures.

KAREN KAAPCKE'S SHOW  
 HALFWAY THERE OPENED  
 MARCH 23 AND RAN THROUGH  
 APRIL 13 AT THE SAG HARBOR  
 FINE ARTS CENTER ON THE  
 SOUTH FORK OF LONG ISLAND.



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- 1 2.17.13, *Self-portrait with Maya's hand*, graphite, 5" x 7".  
 2 1.5.13, *Self-portrait squeezed right up close to the subway door window*. Graphite, 4" x 6". 3 *Self-portrait on my 50th*, 2012. Graphite on watercolor paper, 9" x 12". 4 12.19.12, *Self-portrait in my mother's coat with yellow scarf*. Graphite, gold epoxy paint and chalk, 12" x 15". 5 2.14.13, *Self-portrait, lips*. Graphite, 5" x 7".  
 6 *Self-portrait with green*, graphite and Cray-Pas, 5" x 7". Artwork by Karen Kaapcke. Copyright © 2013 Karen Kaapcke. Used by permission of the artist.

“ IN A DISARMING, BUT SOBERING WAY, SHE HINTS THAT AT THE AGE OF 50, LIFE IS AS MUCH ABOUT THINGS FALLING APART AS IT IS ABOUT BUILDING THINGS UP. – TERRY SULLIVAN

But she wasn't done. Not yet. "The next morning ... I felt that first self-portrait wasn't sufficient. So, I did another one." And just like that, Kaapcke propelled herself into this yearlong self-portrait project.

### Developing an Improvised Method

From the start of this project (which you can see on her blog, [www.unprimedcanvas.blogspot.com](http://www.unprimedcanvas.blogspot.com)), Kaapcke, who is a representational painter, decided to develop a diverse set of methods or techniques to create and finish the drawings. So, there's a much different sensibility, which goes beyond just surface appearances. It's as if she wanted everyday events to not just affect the content of the images, but also to influence the form of the work itself, which includes what medium she sometimes may choose to use.

For instance, in some cases Kaapcke employs an improvisational quality to her technique. Here's how she describes how the drawing *Self portrait during swim team practice #4* came about: "I left the house quickly to bring my daughter to swimming practice, and left my drawing supplies at home," she says. "There's a drugstore on the corner there, and I bought index cards there, too, to draw on. I bought a pen ... a really funky erasable pen that kept on globbing up on me. But I went with that." So, the blue self-portrait displays the visage of the artist amid a constellation of ink spots and abstract marks, which both compete and complement the face staring out from the drawing.

Most of the sketches, though, have been made with traditional fine-art mediums, including graphite, charcoal, chalk, soft pastel or Cray-Pas oil pastel on small, mostly white or off-white pieces of drawing paper.

Sometimes, Kaapcke makes time — or the passage of time — an important aspect in the sketch, particularly in how long she works on the drawing, which may be one of the reasons many of the works have an unfinished look to them. "For many of these drawings, there was an ending imposed on them due to the conditions in which I do them," Kaapcke says. "Either the subway trip ends, the dishwasher repairman comes, my child wakes up and needs breakfast, or swim practice ends. These drawings very often have

artificially imposed limitations and that becomes very important in terms of how they are done. ... So, I need to really determine, if I only have about 10 minutes, exactly what is important to draw."

Sometimes circumstances become an integral part of the process. For instance, when Kaapcke accidentally left her sketchbook in her church on Christmas Eve, something happened that would affect several of her drawings. When she went back she saw a little girl drawing in her book. But Kaapcke was so happy to get her sketchbook back that she didn't look at what the girl had created.



Karen Kaapcke at her show *Halfway There* that opened March 23 and ran through April 13 at the Sag Harbor Fine Arts Center on the south fork of Long Island. Photos courtesy of Sag Harbor Fine Arts Center. Copyright © Lena Yaremenko.

“IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT THE SELF-  
PORTRAIT DRAWINGS BE NARRATIVE  
BECAUSE THE SELF EXISTS IN TIME.  
THAT’S HOW YOU LIVE. THAT’S LIFE. — Karen Kaapcke

But the next day, when she opened her book to start drawing, she was surprised to find the little girl’s sketch. On a whim, she decided to sketch right next to it. In this case, Kaapcke felt a real connection with the child’s drawing, as she reveals in her blog: “The piece started resonating with me on so many levels, not least of which as a manifestation of what has been happening to me this 50th year. I have been coming closer to feeling how I used to feel when drawing as a child, and yet at the same time with all my years in-between.” The resulting drawing is called *Double Portrait*.

Some of the strongest sketches seem to operate on multiple levels of meaning. They don’t just depict the features of the artist, but connect to memory and emotions in a very visceral way. Take the drawing, *Self portrait in My Mother’s Coat with Yellow Scarf*, which at 12” x 15” is one of the larger drawings in this series.

To create the drawing, Kaapcke says she first put on her mom’s coat. When she did so, she got a strong visual and emotional reaction looking at herself in the mirror wearing the coat. So, she began sketching and as she worked, she said, “I kept on feeling I needed more of something. So, I looked around the room, and I saw my son’s gold epoxy paint for his model cars.” She applied the paint — one of the only times she used a wet

medium in her project — over the sketch marks. “I was fighting some heavy emotions, I think. I said to myself, ‘this is my mom’s coat’ and she’s been dead for a long time. But then I needed to lighten it.”

She writes eloquently about this work on her blog as well: “Inspired by a recent drawing in which I bear a very strong resemblance to my mother. I took out her winter coat, the one she loved because she saved up for so long to get it. She died too young,



when I was just finishing up college, and the coat was barely worn. And yet I cannot wear it. My arms are too long, for starters. So it sits, nearly ‘new,’ in my closet. This morning I put on the coat and started to draw. My emotions were conflicted, and I worked nearly all day, breaking only for some chocolate for lunch (which was not such a bad thing) until I had to go pick up the kids. Even still, the drawing haunted me, as it remained at that earlier stage, way too dark. I took an eraser to a large part of it after putting the kids to sleep, and the paper started tearing off; this I liked and kept it.”

So despite the different methods and techniques of working, there are overarching themes that unite all the works, aside from the fact that they’re all self-portraits. The most important is perhaps the notion of narrative. “It was important that the self-portrait drawings be narrative because the self exists in time,” Kaapcke says. “That’s how you live. That’s life. Life isn’t you sitting in a chair studying yourself in a strictly visual way.”



1 Karen Kaapcke’s show *Halfway There* featured this non-traditional display of her artwork. Photo courtesy of Sag Harbor Fine Arts Center. Copyright © Lena Yaremko. 2 1.10.13, *Self-portrait during swim team practice #5* by Karen Kaapcke. Graphite, 5” x 7”. Copyright © Karen Kaapcke. Used by permission of the artist.



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### Getting Started on the Series

Although the scope of her project sounds very broad and almost excessively grand, it began almost as a whimsical thought. "It really started when I woke up one morning, and it was my 50th birthday," Kaapcke says. She didn't feel like having a party, yet she did want to commemorate it in some way. For Kaapcke, it seemed the most logical thing to do was to work on a self-portrait. "It was just the coolest thing I could think of to do to honor my 50th birthday. And the most meaningful. It was the only thing that made sense."

She didn't have paints or brushes, but she did have her drawing box with her as well as some good paper, which is why she chose to use a dry medium instead of a wet one for this series. It was also quick and immediate.

So, on her 50th birthday, she completed her first drawing of the project, a 9" x 12" drawing in graphite. At first glance, the face depicted in this drawing, titled *Self Portrait on my*

*50th*, has a neutral, non-emotional look to it. At the center of this drawing, the eyes, nose, mouth and eyeglasses are carefully considered and rendered, but the artist doesn't seem to be very emotional, although she looks a bit tired. Not happy or sad. Not tense or emotional. But Kaapcke gives the sketch a subtle, almost subliminal edginess: As you move out from the center, to the hair and neck, the shapes and forms become more indistinct and unclear. Her carefully rendered features give way to a halo of chaotic marks that only vaguely suggest hair and a neckline. In fact, it looks as if she erased parts of these sections of the sketch. In doing so, she seems to acknowledge some notion about herself as an artist and a human being. In a disarming, but sobering way, she hints that at the age of 50, life is as much about things falling apart as it is about building things up. That as much as we create, we must realize that things will crumble as well.

1 12.24.12, *Self-portrait in Santa hat* Oil pastel, 8" x 11". 2 1.3.12, *Self-portrait after the 'fiscal cliff' vote, with yellow*. Graphite and chalk, 6" x 8". 3 12.30.12, *Double portrait*. Graphite on paper that was drawn on previously by a young girl, 5" x 7". 4 3.2.13, *Self-portrait during swim team practice #4*. Ballpoint pen, 3" x 5". Artwork by Karen Kaapcke. Copyright © Karen Kaapcke. Used by permission of the artist.

and ran through April 13 earlier this year at the Sag Harbor Fine Arts Center on the south fork of Long Island. In the first room of the exhibition, the works were hung in a traditional way, with the drawings framed and hung in a line. But in the second room, the gallery presented a more experimental presentation format. For instance, one wall had a unique type of configuration, in which groups of drawings were hung right next to each other, almost like clothes hanging from a clothesline.

### Workshop Based on the Series

In addition to being a tirelessly active artist, Kaapcke also teaches painting and drawing workshops. So, it was a natural progression for her to take her ideas on self-portraiture and construct a couple of workshops, one on drawing and one on painting, which she taught at the Sag Harbor Center earlier this year.

In these workshops, all that she's learned about drawing self-portraits has, in a way, come full circle as she works

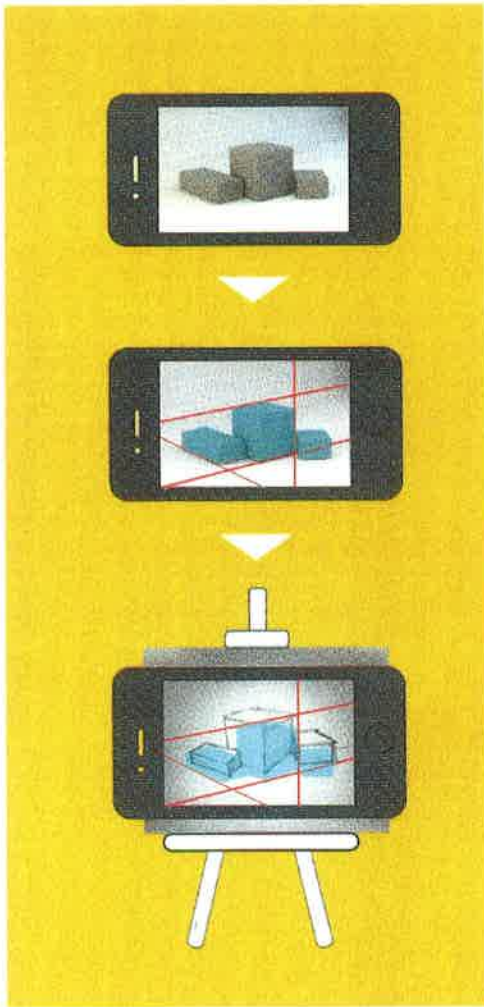
image in my workshop a lot ... hinging between looking at yourself and staying grounded in that, but then you're also having a very particular experience," which also gets conveyed in the image, Kaapcke said. In these workshops, she attempts to convey how self-portraits need to always strike a balance between the conceptual and process, between the idea and the craft. "There's always a balance between what your materials are wanting to do and what you're wanting to do." PA

For more on Karen Kaapcke's work, visit [karenkaapcke.weebly.com](http://karenkaapcke.weebly.com).

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INCLUDES NOTES FROM THE ARTIST. YOU CAN ALSO CLICK ON THE IMAGES TO GET A SLIGHTLY LARGER VERSION OF THE SKETCH.



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