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Long before Kay Ruane enrolled in kindergarten, she was drawing every day—for hours at a time—and hasn't let up since. The oldest of seven siblings in an extended Irish Catholic family, her parents supported her art from the time she was in the crib, when her mother noticed that Kay was spending hours minutely examining any greeting card handed to her. Her father was a well-known physician in Mt. Prospect, a suburb of Chicago, and helped spark an early interest in medical illustrations. He would take her on rounds, then park her in the doctor's library, where she would sit motionless and fascinated, poring over thick medical texts packed with detailed anatomical drawings. As a result, the medical illustrator Frank Netter became her first art hero, and these experiences continue to influence her art.

After attending the Art Institute of Chicago and receiving her BFA at University of Illinois, she worked as a flight attendant, flying mostly international routes and visiting galleries and museums around the world. At that point in her career, she developed a perspective on still life that mirrored her perspective on the world when flying—hyper-realistic and richly detailed collections of objects viewed from above and flowing before the user like a plane gliding across landscapes far below. She continued her art studies and exhibiting schedule while flying, and married Doug Bolin, a nonfiction television producer. They traveled the world together, sometimes on her trips, other times on his shoots, and moved many times, living in Miami, Washington, DC, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and other cities.

In December of 1990, Kay suffered serious injuries when her plane, which was taxiing down a foggy runway at the Detroit Metro Airport, was hit by an oncoming plane traveling 100 miles per hour. The accident put her art career on hold for many years as she underwent multiple surgeries and concentrated on physical rehab. After she successfully resumed her art, her work received several grants and honors, including the Arts Midwest/NEA fellowship and the McKnight Fellowship.

Kay works primarily in graphite on paper, and all of her drawings over the past six years begin in her apartment. Her subject matter is almost exclusively self-portraiture and the settings are drawn from the surrounding interiors and furniture. The views out the window are created from real and imagined landscapes experienced while traveling.

She and her husband begin with a photo shoot, with Doug behind the camera and Kay in front of it. "I explain to him what I'm after, in terms of feelings or ideas," says Kay, "but then I have to just let go and trust his eye. At this point in the process, it is a collaboration. We start with an idea, then I move slowly and he yells, 'Stop!' when he sees something good. The best results may come from the moments in between."

Once the photos of the figure are developed, Kay studies them to develop associations. Should there be a giraffe or two out the window, or does the Great Wall of China belong outside? "These are indefinable responses to the pose. Then I decide whether to keep the furniture as it was in the photo, or to play around with it, adding, say, Queen Elizabeth's coronation photograph to hang on the wall for the drawing 'Coronation,' or Hemingway on a safari in a picture frame for the drawing 'Safari.'"

Her work explores expansive and compelling themes. Its power and psychological impact are found in the intricate details of every element in the setting, which are constantly interacting and evolving. The clothes she wears may be celebratory, yet her posture sullen. The view from her apartment window may be as exotic as the Alps or as mundane as a rower on the Charles River. The objects surrounding the sitter are domestic, yet idiosyncratic to the mood of the piece—everything from an art-history tome to a cowboy lamp. Each drawing derives uniqueness and tension by involving the viewer in the artist's process of discovery and examination.

Kay's art has been exhibited internationally, and is represented in many prestigious private and public collections, including the DeCordova Museum and Fidelity Investments. She is now represented by Miller Block Gallery in Boston, where she currently has a solo show, and Jenkins Johnson Gallery in San Francisco and New York.

For more information, visit www.kayruane.com.

KAY RUANE

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