Janet Kozachek: Mosaic Artist and Poet-Painter

Janet Kozachek’s work concerns itself with vast arcs of history and transnational issues of representation, posing questions at once localized in time and space yet resistant to easy categorization. Living in Orangeburg, South Carolina, she makes mosaics, poems, paintings, and musical instruments that speak to multicultural traditions of creative expression, that memorialize past events and stories, and that comment on contemporary issues of social justice. Her show, *Homestead – A Pictorial Tale of Abandonment and Lessons from the Great Depression* (2009) for example, supported historic preservation efforts in South Carolina. And yet, her messages about home, belonging, and form itself, transcend boundaries of nation and culture.

Kozachek’s mosaic panels recall archaeological sites the artist visited in Pompeii, Herculaneum, Ostia Antica, and China. Each work unfolds with multiple references, often with details in the Chinese calligraphy or with inter-textual allusions to Persian painting or masterpieces of Western art. Each mosaic presents a puzzle to decipher, an education in allegories and codes from our global culture, and rhythmic harmonies. Pieces incorporate ancient subject matter with contemporary material from castaway objects to precious gems. In certain examples, segments of computer hardware frame folk art references in one of the oldest modes of graphic expression: the mosaic.

Each mosaic Kozachek constructs has a story to tell. In *Binomial Sikinnis*, for example, she builds up a palimpsest of semiotic systems, an anti-élitist dance satirizing a political situation, portrayed in ceramic tile, enclosed in bits of motherboard.
Sikinnis translates as, “both a dance and a form of satirical mimodrama. It burlesqued the politics, philosophy and drama of the day and was said to cater to the taste of the common people for vulgarity and sensationalism” (http://www.carnaval.com/greece/dance/). The central glazed tile of Binomial Sikkinis pictures a maenad dancer affiliated with Dionysus. The artist explains, 

Using computer parts in this mosaic, I am satirizing the excesses of the information highway. The materials in the mosaic are, like the internet itself, jewels in juxtaposition with, and sometimes embedded in common substances: pearls fill the holes in the plastic circuits, 24K gold embellishes ordinary glass. (2009)

This mosaic as image not only tells a story, but also signifies in ways that do not translate into language. The motherboard, for example, frames the dancer, evokes technology, and functions decoratively to emphasize the flat surface and abstract, geometric patterning. Consequently, this bit of computer hardware signifies both itself and what some would call pure formal or decorative qualities. In the overall context, the “made in Japan” and “made in Taiwan” imprints deconstruct meaning, as the mosaic was actually made in South Carolina, US. The artist thus appropriates found objects in a way that creates a meeting of East and West.
Kozachek’s attention to geographic distances and perspectival shifts indicates the sensitivity with which she both lives in and renders the world in art. Several years ago, she began fashioning double-sided mosaic masks. She likened this development to that of African American memory vessels in which the inner surface is as valued as the exterior one. She explains, “the other side of the mask was a cave in which objects could grow like stalactites. It was a yin to the yang of the face. It could be a metaphorical other – the things that are in the back of the mind” (Kozachekart.blogspot.com).
Kozachek’s experiments with medial boundaries between word and image come through most obviously with her collections of poems and visual works such as *My Women / My Monsters* (2013). These poems tend towards the highly descriptive, reveling in words as rhyming, rhythm-inducing elements. In “Diamonds in Serpent Eyes” she writes,

Warm nights brought bejeweled snakes from the boughs of trees  
And out of the depths of still waters  
Serpents coming not to feed but to inform  
Belly dancing through the reeds and rushes  
Gliding by with diamonds in their eyes  
Faceted to catch the sunlight and disperse it at their pleasure.

Kozachek thus collects and assembles highly evocative words, as she does the brightest tesserae of her mosaics, rhyming colors and echoing sounds in a synaesthetic display. As in her paintings and her mosaic work, one finds a combination of descriptive meditation and formal dynamism as parts coalesce.
Kozachek’s multicultural art speaks to diverse communities and for the under represented group of those living with chronic illness. As an American with Disabilities herself, she often evokes themes of bodily health in her works. In mosaics including “The Other Side of the Bell Curve” and “A New Perspective on Various Rates of Growth,” she has taken on subjects related to medical treatment and the reality of living with physical disabilities. The Interstitial Cystitis Association journal features her work (Summer 2008).

The artist’s formal education took place on three different continents. Consequently, her influences are multitudinous and her style nearly unclassifiable. She studied art and science at Douglass College in New Jersey, and obtained her Master of Fine Arts degree in painting from Parsons School of Design. In between, she spent seven years in China and Europe where she studied Chinese painting at the Beijing Central Art Academy and ceramic sculpture at the State Academy of Applied Arts in Maastrict, Holland.

Kozachek made a substantial contribution to the development of mosaic arts in the United States by establishing the Society of American Mosaic Artists. Most recently, she created a highly original Book of Marvelous Cats (2015), a hand-bound volume of illustrated rhymes as well as a poetry volume Moments in Light and Shadows (2015), accompanied by her own paintings. In addition, Kozachek performs on ceramic musical instruments she has fashioned herself, including ocarinas of various sizes and an udo drum www.janetkozachek.weebly.com. Janet Kozachek’s imaginative visions and thematic concerns with non-standard paradigms of representation allow her to speak to and for local communities in South Carolina and beyond. As an artist who inspires her viewers with a unique
perspective, wrought in stones, gems, ceramic, paint, and language, Kozachek puts forth archaeologies of the human mind, digging up past relics to illuminate the present.