

Claudia Keep

My work examines the liminal space occupied by young people and the effects of that space upon identity and self-representation.

In my larger-than-life portrait paintings, I use realism and controlled fiction in an attempt to capture a truth that is not always literal. Working from life and my own photos, all elements of my paintings are “real,” but their combination, and existence together, on one canvas, is symbolic, creating a disjuncture and tension that adds a psychological dimension to my paintings.

Inspired by post-modern social theory, medieval tapestries, and social media, I seek to create portraits and figure paintings that contain classical elements—like a denim jacket, T-shirt, or pink hair—that will be true or appealing, but also representative of the current time.

The subjects in my paintings are at an age of possibility but also of uncertainty, even of fear, caught between innocence and adulthood, fixed identity and instability. The larger-than-life (heroic) scale creates importance and engages the viewer. It dignifies the subjects and gives credence to their struggles and fears. The subject of each portrait becomes *someone* rather than a picture of *something*. What could be illustrative on a small scale takes on a new urgency and gravity on a large scale.

Repetition of plants and trees, with their history of symbolizing both the dangerous and the benevolent forces of nature, enhances the feeling of unease and contradiction. It is unclear whether the subjects, framed by flowers, branches, and leaves, are at home in a lush garden or lost in a chartless forest. As in many medieval tapestries, the combination of plants and flowers I have chosen do not represent real places but rather are contrived composites based upon bouquets I have made, trees on my college campus, and gardens I have visited.

Many of the artists I admire infuse their work with subtle humor. Medieval tapestries are full of hidden meaning: the bleeding wounds on the flank of a chained unicorn prove, on closer inspection, to be the juice of ripe pomegranates dripping from the branches above. Through composition control, brushwork variation, and color I also hope to capture humor, playfulness, and a certain sense of the surreal that characterizes real life today.

I have chosen to display the small paintings, painted from life and personal photographs, which serve as studies to inform my larger works. Painting them allows me to work out technical problems such as composition, color, and brushwork. Working from imagination is hard, but these paintings provide a resource, based in life that I can look to; learned techniques and rhythms carry through painting; the light hitting bushes outside a science building helps me to create a pattern of light in the imagined worlds of my larger portraits. In the small paintings I hope to capture the exceptional within a simple, seemingly ordinary moment.