



How Canadian artist Kathy Ager hits the mark between art and commerce

SHAWNA COHEN

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Kathy Ager's list of collaborations include Nike, Polo Ralph Lauren and soon, Real Skateboards.

KATHY AGER/SUPPLIED

At first glance, Kathy Ager's richly coloured paintings could be confused for a 17th-century Baroque still-life. A closer look reveals modern-day objects – Air Jordan sneakers, Supreme baseball bat, discarded Budweiser cans. It's this jarring juxtaposition that has thrust Ager, 41, into the international spotlight. The Vancouver-based artist – who spent nearly a decade in Amsterdam honing her craft – has collaborated with the likes of Nike and Polo Ralph

Lauren, while her striking work has appeared on gallery walls from Los Angeles to Honolulu. We caught up with Ager to dish on sneaker design, her big break and what's next for this burgeoning talent.

You had a successful career as a graphic designer before transitioning to painting full-time. How'd that come about?

I was painting in my spare time – on weekends and in the evenings. I went to design school here in Vancouver and the program included illustration, too. We learned a lot of classical techniques – acrylic, watercolour, oil. I had made a couple of paintings in school. Then, while living in Amsterdam, I got sick and needed to entertain myself because I was stuck at home, recovering. It felt very lonely and isolating. One day I painted a still life from a photo I had seen. I liked how it could tell a story with objects. So I started building my own still lifes with objects around my home. Shortly after, my big break came: I got picked up by a huge gallery in LA (Thinkspace Gallery).

I imagine that was a dream come true.

I remember exactly where I was when it happened. I had just gone to visit a friend in Lisbon and was sitting on a bench, waiting for the bus. I glanced at my phone and wondered, 'Why am I getting all of these followers, all of a sudden?' I only had 200 or 300 followers at the time, then thousands more in the span of a couple hours. I follow a bunch of art and design blogs, many of which welcome submissions. I had only made five or six paintings at the time, but I submitted them to a blog called Booooooom, who posted them on Instagram. That's where all the followers came from. Then I saw a message from Thinkspace Gallery asking if I'd like to work with them. I thought, 'Are you kidding me?' That was my main goal, my end game.



The Hunt, by Ms. Ager.

KATHY AGER/SUPPLIED

How did it feel to open that DM?

It gave me a lot of anxiety. This is what I had wanted but then I thought, 'Okay, now I actually have to produce.' I went back to Amsterdam and freaked out for a couple of weeks. I remember going over to a friend's house and just laying on her couch, wrapped up in a blanket, like a walrus on a beach.

Your paintings stand out because they are clearly Baroque-inspired, and yet you combine animal corpses and still-life with pop-culture elements, such as the Nike logo or a Tyler, the Creator album. How did you come up with this concept?

My paintings represent different people in my life, whether it's a book that reminds me of them or shoes they wore. I put a pair of Nike sneakers in one of my paintings for this exact reason and the response was incredible. Also, when you look at these paintings from the 1600s, there are objects that we'd call antiques but at the time they were very modern things. In 500 years, these Nikes will be considered old-fashioned.

At the moment, however, sneakers are all the rage. What attracts you to sneaker design?

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I have always loved sneakers. My friends would make fun of me because I would look at a guy's shoes before I checked out his face – it just tells me so much about a person. I pay attention to my own shoes in the same way. Nike really has a hold on me. I'll wear other brands, such as Adidas and New Balance, but there's something about Nike's graphics and colours that speak to me. Believe it or not, I don't own too many; I get my fill from painting them. My favourite are my Nike Dunks; there's a simplicity to them yet they have these amazing graphic elements.

It must have been exciting to collaborate with Nike.

Yes! They contacted me through Instagram. I created a painting, which they printed on a sweatshirt. This happened within the first couple of years of being a full-time painter. It's been wild.

Your paintings feel dramatic with lots of deep colour and dark shadows, often in the form of nature. Why does nature play such a big role in your

work and how does it complement brand expression?

Life is intense. And so I try to create images that are both emotional and dramatic but that have a bit of a twist to them. There's this one painting of a male marble bust wearing a balaclava – it feels menacing – and then the title [*The Look Of Love*] flips the narrative. My paintings are very personal in that sense. They're capturing snippets of my life and yet I'm trying to create a kind of message in a bottle, in a way. People can interpret them however they want but I'm hoping they'll have an emotional response; that's what I like about

I Hope Your Flowers Bloom, by Ms. Ager.

KATHY AGER/SUPPLIED

combining these natural, beautiful elements of flowers and fruit with designed objects like sneakers and beer cans. They have a completely different meaning to me than to others, and I love that.

Can you tell me a bit about your process?

Sometimes I get an idea in my head and I'll search for a particular object to paint. I was on the hunt for a coyote of some sort when I got a phone call from my mom. She was out on her daily speed walk with my aunt and she said, 'Kathy, we got this [dead] coyote, let me send you a picture.' My uncle drove up in his red pickup, threw in the coyote and put it in the shade (I remember it was during a summer heatwave). I came over with gloves and got my mom to hold it the position I wanted, and I took some pictures. Then I gave it a burial. My uncle will actually report if he sees anything dead around the property. Friends, too. One was working on a mural on an apartment building and found a goldfinch that had hit a window and fallen

to the ground. She sent me a message: ‘You want this?’ I’ll use it for paintings and then put it back into my freezer. People know I’m on the lookout.

What’s next for you?

I have some skateboards coming out with a big brand called Real Skateboards, who’ll be featuring some of my paintings on their pro boards – some of them are pretty huge! I also have a group show coming up in January called 100 Amigos, where 100 local [Vancouver] artists are invited to create a 12x12” piece of art. It’s curated by Douglas Coupland, Drew Young and Pablo Zamudio. I have to say, it’s been so nice to finally feel part of a local scene.

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