



INFLUENCER - Kathryn Markel: A Passion for Community in Art & Glassworks

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by Susan Hodara

Visitors to [Kathryn Markel Fine Arts](#) in New York City or Bridgehampton can expect to see something more than art on view at the galleries: displays of necklaces and their hand-blown glass beads are easily found, frequently echoing the colors in the paintings featured on the walls. The juxtaposition is evidence of two concurrent passions that are repositories for gallery owner Kathryn Markel's energy, expertise and vision.

Markel's first passion—one she's tended for four decades—is selling art through her art galleries. Since 1976, Markel has been the sole proprietor of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts. She opened her first gallery on 57th Street, moved to Soho and relocated to Chelsea in 2001, where the gallery can currently be found at 529 West 20th Street. She opened a gallery in Bridgehampton, NY in 2010, which now functions as a satellite of her NYC mainstay.

A second more "recent" passion is [GlassRoots](#), a nonprofit based in Newark, NJ that provides studio space and instruction in glass arts and entrepreneurship to local underserved youth. After a decade as an on-again, off-again board member and now board chair for the past four years, Markel is currently chairing the GlassRoots Campaign 2020 committee, which is currently raising money to renovate a new expanded home for the non-profit.

Both activities fuel her. She said in a recent phone interview that she splits her time evenly between the two, explaining that as a longtime gallery owner with well-oiled systems and a reliable staff, her presence on the premises is not always necessary.

The gallery has mounted nine exhibitions in Chelsea this year, with three more planned through October. Kathryn Markel Fine Arts represents 61 emerging and established contemporary artists, most of them painters, many of them women, all of them signaling Markel's distinct and honed sensibility.



Kathryn Markel Fine Arts NYC. Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

"Everything I represent is beautiful," she said, "but it's an interesting sort of beautiful, because it reflects the artists' mindsets."

The depth of possibility in those mindsets drives Markel. She savors her interactions with her artists and her role in giving them opportunities to develop and show their work.

And to sell it. Markel's clientele are a mix of private collectors, designers and art consultants, and her pricing, she said, "is pretty reasonable. I like to keep everything under \$20,000, with most of it under \$10,000." The gallery courts the public by offering Chelsea gallery tours, a blog on its website, and a digital "Picture of the Week" delivered to subscribers via email.

Aesthetically, Markel appreciates works that revel in the tension between accident and intentionality, like Sydney Licht's somewhat precarious sculptures, shown in her latest solo exhibitions in Chelsea and Bridgehampton, NY.

Licht's paintings are still lifes: brimming containers - bowls, boxes, vases - alongside domestic objects like sardine cans, tape dispensers and Kleenex. Her subjects are often flattened and shoved towards the edges of the frame. Extending her imagery, her sculptures consist of found boxes, their logos and decorations exposed. They are stacked but not attached, and they could easily topple, especially in a crowded gallery. None has, but both Licht and Markel were galvanized by the risk.

"I love an artist's willingness to play," Markel said, a quality she calls "joie de paint."



"Still Life with Tape Dispenser" by Sydney Licht, 2018. Oil on linen, 10 x 10 inches. Courtesy Kathryn Markel.

Visitors to the gallery's website will see that "joie de paint" is everywhere, not only on canvases but in sculptures and mixed-media assemblages, in abstraction and representation. Colors explode. Patterns flow. The adjectives that come to mind include "dynamic" and "delightful."

The same modifiers apply to Markel herself. A petite woman with short salt-and-pepper hair, she exudes a gusto that is contagious. She married her husband, Huibert Soutendijk, in 1975. "He's Dutch," she said. "I like to call us 'The Flying Dutchman and the Jewish princess.'" The parents of two grown sons, the couple divide their time between homes in Bronxville, in Westchester County, NY and in Sagaponack, NY in The Hamptons.

She can be found on weekends in her Bridgehampton gallery, greeting visitors with an enthusiastic "Hiiiiii! If you have any questions, you know where to find me."



Kathryn Markel with works by Deborah Zlotzky. Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

When she's not in her galleries, Markel might be found at GlassRoots. She was first introduced to the organization by its founder, Patricia Kettenring, a fellow member of the women's arts organization [ArtTable](#). The ability of the glass arts to engage young people impressed Markel.

"Glass as a medium can be transformative for these kids," she said. "Not only do they get to be creative, but they have to learn problem-solving and fine motor skills. They have to understand engineering and science. They have to be patient and focused and persistent."



GlassRoots kids in mosaic frames class. Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

Since opening in 2001, GlassRoots has expanded in size and reach. It is preparing to move from its 5,700-square foot location to a nearby 25,000-square foot 19th-century former hospital—an endeavor that requires extensive renovations and a \$2.1 million budget.

As chair of the GlassRoots Campaign 2020 committee, Markel is spearheading the effort to raise those funds. The committee has already procured \$1.6 million, and the organization is scheduled to occupy its new quarters next spring.

And the necklaces? Markel loves them. Designed by Kate Dowd, GlassRoots' assistant program director and flame-working instructor, they are made at GlassRoots by students and staff and feature clusters of quirky round beads in families of color. "Kathy always wears them," GlassRoots' CEO Barbara Heisler said. "She owns a whole series, and she coordinates them with her outfits."

Markel also sells them, in both of her galleries and at art fairs the gallery participates in. Heisler said it was significant that Markel presents the jewelry among works of art.

"When people see the necklaces," she said, "they are connecting them to Kathy, but they are also connecting them to art."



GlassRoots necklaces. Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts.

A necklace costs \$135, all of which is given to GlassRoots. Markel estimated that she sells between 30 and 40 a year. "She'll sell you one off her neck if you like it," Heisler said.

That same enthusiasm for building the GlassRoots program also manifests in the way Markel builds

community.

In winter, Markel closes her Bridgehampton gallery but doesn't leave it fallow, binding the windows with butcher block paper as many vacant stores do across The Hamptons. Instead, she invites community members—art dealers, artist groups and curators—to use the gallery free of charge in any way they choose in January, February and March. “I hate the idea that it's sitting there empty,” she said. “I want it to be active.”

As a longtime businesswoman, Markel is also pragmatic. Heisler called her “tenacious.” The painter [Josette Urso](#), whom Markel has represented since 2000, used the words “honest” and “direct.” Licht said she is “open.”

These traits, along with Markel's discriminating eye and buoyant spirit, have left a far-reaching mark on many: the hundreds of artists she has worked with; gallerygoers who have been moved by one of her countless exhibitions; clients who have acquired artwork that they live with every day; novice and experienced GlassRoots artists who can continue to learn and explore; people who have admired the necklaces in her galleries and around her neck, and who have purchased one for themselves.

“When they buy one,” Markel said, “I tell them, ‘Now when you wear it and people tell you how beautiful it is, you have to tell them about GlassRoots.’”

BASIC FACTS: Kathryn Markel Fine Arts is located in Chelsea at 529 West 20th Street, Suite 6W, New York, NY 10011 and in Bridgehampton at 2418 Montauk Highway, Bridgehampton, NY 11937. www.markelfinearts.com.

GlassRoots is located at 10 Bleeker Street in Newark, NJ 07102. www.glassroots.org.

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