

Definitive Details

TEXT BY JESS DAILEY

Kim Beck's artwork transforms boring into beautiful, calling viewers to pay attention to their everyday world.

Kim Beck rummaged around in a large drawer, pulling out a few sheets of thick white paper. She tucked a lock of dark brown hair behind her ear.

"Wow, look at all these drawings I forgot about," she said as she laid them on the table in front of me. She fingered the edge of a square sheet. "This is really good paper, too. I guess it pays to be a bit of a pack rat."

The paper will serve Pittsburgh-based artist Kim Beck well when she travels back to New York, where she is currently doing an artist's residency at the Space Program with the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation. She is back in town for the weekend to finalize a public art project, replenish her supplies and, most importantly, visit her dog, Olive.

"She's my baby!" exclaimed Kim, pointing out a picture of a black dog pinned above her desk on her wall of inspiration. "She's half cocker spaniel, half chow. While I'm away, my friends from Encyclopedia Destructica are taking care of her."

While her dog may be the highlight of her trip back home, professional reasons were the cause. Kim recently received a commission to create four decorative panels for a new police station in the Allentown neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The station has been converted from an old international youth hostel, and the ground-level windows will be replaced with bulletproof panels to meet safety requirements. Because the building sits at the entrance of the neighborhood, redevelopment officials worked with the Office of Public Art to meet the requirements in an aesthetically pleasing way. Kim's etchings will welcome visitors to the area and help make the station a mark of stability.

"I'm not sure how a few panels are supposed to stabilize a neighborhood," Kim said, "but I'm glad to be a part of it."

The Public Art Commission fits in nicely with Kim's larger body of work, which deals with architecture. Kim told me that her interest in landscape - natural and man-made -

bloomed when she was a graduate student.

"I was making work about things that were a bit far away from me," Kim said. "Then I had the experience where I was asked to really think about what I knew personally."

Her thoughts led her to her childhood in Littleton, Colorado, where the spatial elements of the suburban landscape had made a big impression on her. But it wasn't the ideal image of suburbia that attracted Kim. "I was interested in looking at these things that people try to get out of the way when they're trying to take a nice photograph," she said. "You try to visually delete these things that you think mar the final image. I find myself really drawn to things like that, the things you're supposed to ignore, like power lines."

One of Kim's pieces, "Self-Storage," exemplifies her interest in life's less attractive structures.

"[Storage units] aren't meant to be beautiful structures," said Kim. "They're meant to get out, be built fast, to be able to house all these residential belongings without much money being spent on material."

"Self-Storage" was recently displayed at the Carnegie Museum of Art as part of the touring exhibit titled "World's Away: Suburban Landscapes." It consisted of two parts. The first is a set of cutout images, layered over one another. At first glance, the structures are unrecognizable, the shapes and lines repeated in a disorienting way. A closer look reveals the multiple entrances and sharp angles of a storage unit. Kim sketched the structures from multiple viewpoints and in varying sizes on several sheets of white paper. Then, she cut away the doors and walls to create an outline of the building. She stacked the cutouts so that the lines from one piece cross through the openings in another. The final result is a confusing display of depth and space.

The second part is a digital video of the cutouts being created. Black lines zig-zag across the white screen, forming the overlapping storage sheds. The viewer watches, waiting for the moment when the image seems complete, which

never comes. Instead, the lines abruptly disappear and begin in a new area of the screen, as if the artist erased the previous image and started over.

The piece calls viewers to closely examine the sheds and structures that they would normally overlook or mistake for something else entirely.

"[Most people] picture a very specific type of storage facility where the units have flat roofs and look kind of like warehouses," said Kim. "With ["Self Storage,"] the doors and the pitched roof create this almost house-like shape that is not a house at all. If you actually spend time looking at it, you realize that it doesn't have two windows and a door, it actually has six doors and no windows."

While self-storage units may seem like a logical topic considering Kim's interests, serendipity brought the structure to her.

"It's funny in a way - there's this large conceptual narrative about how this storage shed fits into my bigger body of work," said Kim, "but really I was just drawing outside one day during residency in Vermont and saw those sheds."

For working artists like Kim, residencies offer a period of time to focus solely on creating. According to Kim, a residency is like "a \$10,000 scholarship" that provides prime studio space and unique opportunities.

"You're spending time with other artists who are just

working on their art, like you," said Kim. "You get to have conversations with people that you wouldn't meet in day-to-day life."

For her current residency in New York, Kim took the spring and summer semesters off from teaching, drawing and printmaking at Carnegie Mellon University. While such an endeavor may not seem appealing during these tough financial times, it was the economic strife that inspired Kim's newest project.

"I'm interested in drawing all the banners that are coming out with closing-down businesses," Kim said. "Like with the sheds and all my work, I'm looking at my environment and, currently we're in the middle of an economic disaster, so that's what's out there."

Where many artists analyze and critique our culture and society through abstraction or re-appropriation, Kim highlights the banal and everyday, focusing our attention on the details we choose to ignore that often define our environment.

"I want to make people stop and think about the things they might not have seen otherwise," said Kim. "I want to get them to spend the time, even if it's just a couple minutes, thinking about and looking at something that they just might not have seen."

KIM'S WALL OF INSPIRATION

