

DEATH by DECEIT

Jerry Kearns

In the early 1980s, when I returned to painting and studio art after five years as a cultural activist in communities throughout New York City, I was preoccupied with studying the construction of our definitions of self: *Who we think we are is becoming more and more predigested, interpreted, and controlled*. I saw that our national institutions and belief systems were increasingly employed as social control mechanisms. Entertainment was a soft baton whose marks do not appear on the audience.

I felt then, and still do, that news media, pop culture, and fine art transcribe and integrate what become acceptable values and behaviors. The underlying purpose, besides short-term money, being to bind the individual to the power structure and perpetuate the system. Since the 1980s, the media have shined floodlights down the path to a major cultural and political shift. The nation's slide away from human *values* to embrace commodity *valuables* hit its stride with Ronald Reagan's merger of entertainment and far-right politics.

The accumulation of individual wealth and the attainment of glamour were to become our national religion. At the time, I saw the growth of mediated reality overtaking direct experience. And I sensed the emergence of a new personality type. I used the term *mediated* to describe a personality that gets most of what she or he knows about daily *reality* from mass-media sources.

Figure 1 *Between Time*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 84 × 84 in. Courtesy of the artist





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Figure 2 *Road to Casablanca*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 96 × 76 in. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist

I wanted to make my art be part of telling the story we live. So I decided to take a clue from the counterculture of the 1960s. I decided to intervene, to edit and compose another view of the reality generated by mass culture and fine art. I thought artists could function as witnesses by giving testimony. From a review of my work, I adopted the term Psycho-Pop, thinking of my images as conceptual art expressed in painting.

I began to think about mainstream media as deception: *Not only do we get most of what we know from media sources, most of that is a lie.* From the two cowboys, Reagan and Bush the younger, to Bill Clinton, the fake Elvis, back to *Change We Can Believe In* with

Barack Obama, on to Donald Trump's current Joker impersonation, we get the "show." Offscreen is where the real deal goes down, mostly unseen. We live under deep cover with tragically permanent consequences.

Early one morning in May 2015, a team of Sloan Kettering specialists told my wife, Nora York, and me, she would likely die within a year to sixteen months. Nora and I lived, hand in hand, through the next terrifying fourteen months. Pancreatic cancer is an agonizing march of destruction through the digestive system. Victims starve to death in great pain.

As I write, television ads and social media postings are informing the New York region of a class action lawsuit seeking federal funds to cover as many as forty thousand people who were regularly exposed to the deadly toxins carried in the post-9/11 air over Lower Manhattan. Nora's death is one of several thousand already traced to breathing that toxicity. Thousands more will die because of the reassuring campaign of deception and lies orchestrated by the Bush administration through EPA director Christine Todd Whitman, President George W. Bush, and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Following the destruction of the World Trade Towers, this trio took to the media. Bush urged everyone to "act normal," suggesting we take the family shopping. Whitman infamously appeared on TV with her children playing outdoors. Mayor Giuliani, riding a wave of presidential ambition, regularly appeared on news broadcasts touting normal behavior as the best revenge. All three lied about the toxicity we were breathing to keep the money flowing. Each of them signed death warrants for thousands when they agreed to lie about the horrifying dangers in what was some of the most toxic air ever measured.

Soon after hearing our life-shattering news, I remember Nora turning toward me: *Darling, I'm frightened of losing my mind. How are we going to stay sane? How are we going to get up each day?* I said: *Me too sweetheart . . .* She said: *Let's make art about what it is like when*

time stops passing you by, and turns around to plow you under!

My installation, *Diva's Song*, opened at the Mike Weiss Gallery in July 2015. Nora's amazing concert of the same title was performed at Joe's Pub on July 29. She had been performing selected arias

Figure 3 *Bam Bam*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 92 in. Courtesy of the artist







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Figure 4 *Two on a Match*, 2017.
Acrylic on canvas, 84 × 115 in.
Courtesy of the artist

from Puccini's brilliant opera *Tosca* for several years. I loved the romantic passionate story and saw elements of our life together in the narrative. Nora's livecast and recorded concert were among the most memorable of her career (Nora York's *Diva's Song*: jerrykearns.com/ds-events/).

On September 3, 2016, Nora died in my arms. We were in our apartment on Grand Street in Lower Manhattan. Nora York was an extraordinary woman, a great musician and songwriter, and a wonderful teacher. She was also the center of my life. I believe that she was murdered. Her

Figure 5 *Next of Kin (After J. S. Copley)*, 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 48 × 38.25 in. Courtesy of the artist





Figure 6 *Madonna and Child*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 96.5 × 80 in. Palmer Museum, Pennsylvania State University. Courtesy of the artist

death was not a gun-to-the-head kind of murder. She was killed slowly by the lies of politicians who were serving money, not people.

During the fourteen months since

her death, I have been working toward an exhibition. Maybe I will call it *Next to Nowhere*. The show will include two paintings reproduced here, *Between Time* and *Two on a Match*, alongside six others,

and an animated film. These images are emerging from the between-world I now experience—from living next to nowhere, from existing without her.

If making culture is to be a hedge against mortality, and a signal of new life, as I believe it should be, then these paintings are memorials to Nora and forays into searching for a way forward. Since there is no way out, the question then becomes: *Is there a way forward?*

Acknowledgments

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Jerry Kearns has exhibited internationally across the Americas, Europe, and Asia since the 1980s. He has been featured many times in the *New York Times*, *Art and Auction*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, and *Artforum*, among others. His paintings and prints are in many public and private collections, including the Museum of Modern Art (New York), National Gallery (Berlin), Brooklyn Museum (New York), Art Institute of Chicago, Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), Norton Family Collection (Los Angeles), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Queensland Art Gallery (Australia). See jerrykearns.com/ds-images/.

Figure 7 *Naked Brunch*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 96 × 85 in. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist

